

CHISUM'S PILGRIMAGE II:
MELVIN JACKSON CHISUM, SR., LOUIS HARLAN'S "SPY"
UNRAVELLED IN BIOGRAPHY 1873-1945

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Abstract: No man's life and work should be based on the ethics and morality of his employer, especially when the employer was the controversial leader of American Blacks in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Booker T. Washington (BTW). In the groundbreaking biographies written by Louis Harlan about BTW, that is what happened to Melvin Chisum's life. While black historians and journalists wrote about Chisum as charismatic and idiosyncratic during his lifetime; in the 1970s historian Harlan used Chisum's life story in juxtaposition to BTW's, in order to highlight the work ethic he thought BTW portrayed. Calling Chisum no more than a villainous "spy" and "provocateur" of the era, Harlan left historians and their students with a void in Progressive Era history because Chisum represented so much more in social and political endeavors during his lifetime. This dissertation uses Harlan's own achieved records, the insight of Chisum's family members, and personal letters between Chisum and colleagues. While this dissertation does not describe all of Chisum's deeds during his lifetime, it does give an overview of Harlan's perceptions, a background of Chisum's early life, corrects myths, offers a black social gospel perspective of Chisum, and fills gaps in historiography. This dissertation describes and enhances both black history and American history. Unknown inter and intra race alliances are revealed that were once thought of as unheard of in American history. Chisum's Pilgrimage II places the end of BTW's administration of accommodation, which Harlan believed ended in 1916, squarely in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal Administration. Groundbreaking research shows that Chisum, once a spy for the American black leader BTW, became an investigator for the Public Works Administration for two consecutive terms of the New Deal. From there the dissertation briefly indicates of how Bookerites like Chisum supported the Civil Rights movement by backing the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

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CHAPTER I

DISCERNING TRUTH FROM THE DEAD

“The story of my father will never be told, because the details are shrouded in clouds of history and the people who lived those events have gone on to their rewards in another world. Louis R. Harlan’s reference to Dad as “Booker T. Washington’s spy” is an example of this. Referring to him in this way is like writing of Bobby Kennedy as “John F. Kennedy’s brother.” This is a true statement, but it is so much short of the whole truth that it is nearly a misstatement. Mr. Harlan’s vision was limited by what he could see from the correspondence he discovered, and that was not much.”¹

--- Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr. (1921-2014)

No man’s life should be molded around what one of his employer’s critics believed to be true about him, especially when the employer was Booker T. Washington (hereafter denoted as BTW) (1856-1915), the acknowledged leader of African Americans in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, who had legions of critics. In modern historiography, the legacy of Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr., the American black efficiency agent, investigator, sometimes spy and provocateur, is primarily interpreted in juxtaposition to BTW through the groundbreaking work

¹ Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 23 June 2005. Held in author’s notebook.

of historian Louis Harlan (1922-2010) in the 1970s. Yet Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., questioned the clarity of his vision. Using several different interpretive sources from scholars who defined the life of Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr., including his family, oral interviews and their papers, this work strives to frame the components of his life to give more than a comprehensive biography of Melvin Chisum beyond his work for BTW. It adds to American Black historiography by moving beyond the BTW versus William DuBois quarrel of accommodation versus out right resistance. This dissertation explains how resistance took many forms, including a first time look at a broader narrative showing how resistance to black achievement was so solidly entrenched that it evoked from blacks working within the President Franklin D. Roosevelt administration a distaste so strong that it became the impetus for Bookerites to push for a Civil Rights movement.

One of the most difficult tasks for historians is to remain objective and dispassionate in the treatment of the past, especially when the people or events they study involve controversy or momentous affairs. A good example of this is the life of Melvin Chisum, who has been characterized in his own time and by historians as either a civil rights leader or a traitor. This work examines the historical legacy of Chisum and in the process sheds light on the historiographical debates among black historians and historians of civil rights; it employs family legends and records in order to create a faithful, honest and objective biography. The life and legacy of

Chisum is more than the biography of one man; it is an example of the struggle to define and control the dominant narrative of black history.

This dissertation uses Louis Harlan's narrative, which dominates the history, to explain the necessity for providing a biography of Melvin Chisum. In current scholarship there are several strands of scholarship on Chisum that conflict with each other. The strands include the works of Louis Harlan, Chisum's own contemporaries from the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the 1960s, and the Chisum-Twine family. Since the 1970s Louis Harlan's works controlled the black narrative about BTW and thus Chisum. Harlan's books included perhaps the first biographical narrative of Chisum in the second half of the twentieth century. Through his presentation Harlan concluded that Chisum was no more than a notorious, reprehensible spy, and provocateur used by BTW to perform dirty deeds to keep BTW in power. Harlan concluded that after BTW's death, Chisum, like other lieutenants who worked for the Tuskegee machine, went into obscurity.

The second group includes black literary scholars, journalists, and historians of the Progressive and New Deal eras who were contemporaries of Melvin Chisum, Sr. These men and women recounted Chisum's pilgrimages around the country in black newspapers on a weekly basis. Three books covered the work of Chisum: *Chisum's Pilgrimage*, by Wendell Phillips Dabney (1865-1952) another by Robert Russa Moton (1867-1940), *Finding a Way Out: An Autobiography*, and an anthology *Negro Caravan*, edited by Sterling Brown (Howard University), Arthur P. Davis (Virginia Union University), and Ulysses Lee (Lincoln University). In *Finding a Way*

Out: An Autobiography, Moton describes Chisum as a man with good business sense, conscientious, and levelheaded, working within manufacturing companies as an efficiency man.¹ Perhaps the zenith of Chisum's career came when his contemporaries celebrated his life by placing a story about him in the anthology *Negro Caravan* in 1941.² During a time of Jim Crow and war preparation, the *Negro Caravan* presented significant stories of the "Negro character and experience" in America. The editors came from leading American black universities that had installed black presidents. The *Negro Caravan* was a document of pride. In relation to Chisum, the title of William Phillips Dabney's book *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others* (1927) was changed to "A Visit to Dunbar's Tomb." Dabney's short story, published in the anthology, preserves Chisum as a character to remember from the Progressive Era, except the name Melvin Chisum was not used, only his initials "M---C---."

When the anthology was first published in 1941 a change in the power structure of black leaders had occurred. As after the death of Frederick Douglass, the death of race leader Robert Russa Moton left black Americans with no obvious leader. During this time Chisum's influence was pivotal in the development of the early civil rights movement. Unlike Harlan's central theme of spy and provocateur for BTW, the "A Visit to Dunbar's Tomb" develops a theme of Chisum as the "Sojourner Truth," the "Harriett Tubman," a philanthropist, journalist, and an

¹ Robert Russa Moton, *Finding a Way Out: An Autobiography* (London: Adelphi Terrace: T. Fisher Unwin Ltd., 1920), 282.

² Wendell Phillips Dabney, "A Visit to Dunbar's Tomb," in *Negro Caravan*, ed. Arthur Paul Davis, Sterling Allen Brown, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden Press, 1941), 1000.

unconventional character in the Progressive and New Deal Eras. Because nothing has been written about Chisum during the period, his vocation in the federal government has to be used to discern the integral workings of the Bookerites within the make-up of the New Deal. Adding this thread can develop the history of how Bookerites orchestrated the Civil Rights movements of the 1940s, including how they supported the March on Washington planned in 1941 to be led by A. Philip Randolph.

Within four years after the publication of *Negro Caravan* and Executive Order 8802 signed by President Franklin Roosevelt, Melvin Chisum died, leaving his family with only memories of his life and some documents supporting his claims of who he was. In the present era the Chisum family recounts family legends and stories from the past that linked Melvin Chisum with Texas, Oklahoma, George Pullman, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and major political, social, and economic events of his time period. Chisum claimed he met and knew every president from William McKinley to Franklin Roosevelt. Dr. Melvin Jackson Chisum, Jr., Phi Beta Kappa honor society member, WWII veteran, medical doctor, community leader, and philanthropist, introduced legends, family stories, letters, and documents that showed a hard-working, loving father and husband who worked for men such as BTW, Bishop William Derrick of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Robert Russa Moton, electricity philanthropist Samuel Insull, and presidents of the United States. Melvin Chisum Sr. was also appointed as the first American black Public Works Administration investigator in American history.

Dr. Chisum's information lines up with historian Dr. James Smallwood (1944-2013), who wrote extensively about blacks in Texas from slavery to Reconstruction, and as a Texas Tech graduate student published his dissertation in 1974, "Black Texans During Reconstruction 1865-1874." Smallwood's collection of books helped unearth the Chisum's family lineage from their period of slavery in Macon, Georgia, to their freedom in Mexia, Texas. These strands of information have not been blended with others to develop a comprehensive narrative. This omission causes a problem for modern scholars who want to place Chisum into the American narrative.³

Louis Harlan's school treated Chisum as a spy and provocateur and remains the master narrative, but it is breaking down because of twenty-first century research capabilities in locating once hard-to-find information. Unsure of which thread to follow or to create, scholars labeled Chisum as everything from salesman, to government agent, to spy, to minister. After forty years, as the master narrative of the Harlan school breaks down, a reevaluation of that narrative becomes necessary –not only about the chronicles – but the goals of the history.

³ Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 24-26. Weiss discussed the Republican effort to win the election in 1932. Without Chisum's part in the election her discussion lacks the real competitiveness among black Democrats. Beth Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 24. Bates links Chisum back to the National Negro Press Association and his ties to George Pullman. Blanche Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2: The Defining Years, 1933-1938* (London: Penguin, 1999), 158. Cook described Chisum as a journalist not realizing that as a part of Harold Ickes Department of Interior Chisum was punished for contacting Eleanor Roosevelt with the valuable suggestion.

The threads also unravel with the query from Dr. Chisum, Jr.—“was Harlan’s vision limited?”—and takes the merit of Harlan’s portrayal of Chisum, Sr., to another level. Rhetorically, Dr. Chisum asked if Harlan used the information he found in the 1960s and 1970s in his research on Melvin Chisum to give a fair and accurate portrayal of his father or did he use only those parts that created an archetype of the man he needed to play the antagonist in American black history. Or was something else going on interpretatively? Without a full Chisum biography these queries remain in limbo. Were there ties between Chisum and Harlan? Were there ties to others who helped with the research? Out of the many spies BTW used, why was Chisum separated as so important in the BTW papers versus the many other spies in the network? These questions are linked to how BTW and his followers were responding to Jim Crow inequality. These questions can only be answered with a background check on Harlan and Chisum.

After Harlan’s publication of “Booker T. Washington in Biographical Perspective” in the *American Historical Review* (October 1970), and the subsequent publication of the article “The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington” in the *Journal of Southern History* (1971), in which Harlan labeled Chisum as a low “spy and provocateur,” Dr. Chisum began to question Harlan’s portrayal. As the Harlan description became the dominant interpretation, the editors of *Negro History Bulletin*, an American black publication, sought an article on Chisum to counter the emerging negative portrayal of him. The magazine reached out to Dr. Chisum. An article published under the byline of Thelma Perry soon appeared in print in the attempt to correct some of the negative assessments. It was labeled as material

gathered by Dr. Chisum. According to the article, Dr. Chisum “declined the byline because he did not have time to write an article about his father.”⁴ However, he assembled data “to recreate a few highlights of the career of Chisum, Sr.”⁵ Thus, staff member Thelma Perry’s name was used to publish “Melvin Chisum, Pioneer Newsman” in *Negro History Bulletin* in 1973.

Even though history tends to merge the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s were not a post-civil rights era. They were the years civil rights legislation was being carried out in the mainstream culture. Even the denomination Dr. Chisum sometimes worshiped in, the Methodist Church, did not technically integrate as the United Methodist Church until the early 1970s. While civil rights writers such as Harlan integrated the historical literature to incorporate men such as BTW and Chisum, Smallwood corrected the narrative of the history of blacks in Texas. As his father had dealt with Jim Crow some eighty years prior, Chisum’s son and his wife, the former Gloria Twine, were living the changes coming from the end of Jim Crow. Melvin Chisum Jr., a medical doctor, was on the front line of expert blacks moving from segregated positions and into elements of white American society.

Dr. Chisum’s expertise in arthritis, rheumatology, and internal medicine led to his recruitment from his own private practice of medicine in Philadelphia to become an associate medical director of Bell Telephone Company. Like so many

⁴ Thelma D. Perry, “Melvin J. Chisum, Pioneer Newsman, *Negro History Bulletin*, 1 December 1973, Vol. 36, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

blacks with varied talents, Dr. Chisum found his professional time limited. Inundated with work in the changing world of race and politics, as a lead physician at AT&T, Dr. Chisum did not find the time to write an article in rebuttal to the statements coming out about his father in the manuscripts that Harlan produced. While, in his articles, “Booker T. Washington in Biographical Perspective” and “The Secret Life of Booker Washington,” and eventually in books on the life of BTW Harlan reintroduced the Melvin Chisum, Sr., character with his own interpretation, even though the earlier works by Wendell Phillips Dabney, Sterling Brown, and Thelma Perry/Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., provided greater detail about Chisum and his work.⁶ With the flick of Harlan’s pen, the Chisum of wit and integrity changed into a dark menacing character. Harlan cast him as no more than a spy and provocateur for BTW.

Chisum’s new character was first cast in the *Journal of Southern History* article, “The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington” (August 1971).⁷ The first volume of Harlan’s biography, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901*, was published in 1972. It was awarded the Bancroft Prize, possibly the most prestigious annual honor in the field of American history. The second volume, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*, was published in 1983. Harlan won the Pulitzer Prize for biography, a second Bancroft Prize, and the Albert

⁶ Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Volume 7 1903-4* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 219. Hereafter cited as *BTWP*. They wrote, “From 1903 to 1906 Chisum was Washington’s paid spy—and perhaps sometimes provocateur—in the ranks of BTW’s critics.”

⁷ Louis Harlan, “The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington,” *Journal of Southern History* 37 (August 1971). This contains a biography of Chisum.

J. Beveridge Award for the best book on American history. The Chisum identity and name and, indeed, the black narrative of the first quarter of the twentieth century changed hands from those who had lived it and struggled with Jim Crow, to those who wrote about it. In the words of Dr. Henry Ponder, president of several black universities, including Fisk University, Talladega University, Benedict University, and Langston University and a native of Oklahoma, "It is he who writes the history that makes the greatest impact."⁸

Taking on the master narrative of black America, Harlan removed Chisum far away from the heroic actions of black leaders, so different from the writings of the men and women who wrote about him in the black world. What Harlan wrote about BTW and supporters of his ideology became the gold standard, regardless what black biographers wrote prior to his books. What Harlan wrote changed the dominant narrative of at least two black leaders—BTW and Melvin Chisum. Harlan was in control of the narrative about black life in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The model for black historiography came from new sources: Gunnar Myrdal's, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) versus BTW's, *Up From Slavery* (1901) and a new black hero is made of W.E.B. DuBois and his National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) over and against BTW and Tuskegee University.

⁸ Dr. Henry Ponder interview with Author 23 August 2015, in the Leonelle Young Hargrove, Dr. Isaac William Young, Chisum Collection at Oklahoma City University Dulaney- Brown Library , Oklahoma City Oklahoma. Hereafter cited as OKCU.

Did Louis Harlan remain objective and dispassionate in the treatment of the American black past? The late Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., believed that the details of his father's progressive history have been shrouded in history to the point they are almost unrecoverable. Dr. Chisum wrote in 2005, "Louis R. Harlan's reference to Dad as 'Booker T. Washington's spy' is an example of this. Referring to him in this way is like writing of Bobby Kennedy as 'John F. Kennedy's brother.' This is a true statement, but it is so much short of the whole truth that it is nearly a misstatement. Mr. Harlan's vision was limited by what he could see from the correspondence he discovered, and that was not much."⁹ Was Harlan limited or did he readjust facts to fit the time period of the civil rights movement? Can they be recovered by checking Harlan's research? Also, key in this argument is the idea of accommodation versus resistance. In other words, a standard of judgment was made – civil rights, political action and resistance were good; therefore, the policy of accommodation, meaning accepting second class citizen status, was bad – and thus those for accommodation were bad and backward.

Until August of 2017 the boxes of Harlan's research on his books and articles remained closed and unprocessed in an archival warehouse used by the University of Maryland, College Park. Opening the boxes of Harlan's research revealed over five hundred pages of research related to Melvin Chisum, including the article written in 1973 in the *Negro History Bulletin*. The records at the University of Maryland show that researchers presented a thorough background check on Chisum to Dr. Harlan.¹⁰

⁹ Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 23 June 2005. OKCU.

¹⁰ Louis R. Harlan Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries,

Yet from all the research gathered for Harlan's manuscripts, only two disparaging words were used to describe Melvin Jackson Chisum as "spy and provocateur." One incongruous full paragraph explaining the relationship between BTW and Chisum served as idiosyncratic or anecdotal to the overall BTW-Chisum relationship. It referred to slavery. Could the stain of slavery link BTW and Chisum and Harlan? Washington, having started in slavery and poverty, would "gag at almost nothing that promised dominance."¹¹ Could this sentence point to deeper questions in research not accounted for in Harlan's works?

About the time Dr. Chisum moved to Bell Telephone Company and Louis Harlan won awards for his work on BTW, a new voice in the wilderness arose in academia. A revisionist scholar, Dr. James Smallwood, struggled to correct the historical record of Reconstruction, particularly in Texas. Smallwood became associate professor at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, in the History Department in 1975. Refuting long-held themes of Texans of the Dunning school, Smallwood wrote and published a groundbreaking work, *Time of Hope and Time of Despair: Black Texans During Reconstruction* in 1981. His book won the Coral H. Tullis Award in 1982 for the best book of the year on Texas history.¹²

Hornbake Library, College Park Maryland. Critics, Box (35), Box (38) Discarded notes, Box (40), Biographical Material Box, (40), and Secret life, Personal Box (41). This collection is currently unprocessed.

¹¹ Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 92.

¹² Howell, Kenneth (2014), "In Memoriam: James Smallwood," *East Texas Historical Journal*, Vol. 52: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol52/iss1/7>

By using Smallwood's scholarship and linking it to the Chisum biography, another unwoven strand appears for the rationale of a biography of Melvin Chisum. The Chisum family was a group of Afro Texans. Moreover, they followed the path of the Harlan clan to Texas from Georgia. The Harlans moved from Mason, Georgia, to Robertson County, Texas, adjacent to Limestone County, as early as 1837. Chisum's father, John Chisum, came to Texas as a slave from Macon in the late 1850s or early 1860s with John Chisholm. Macon and Mason, Georgia, are about the width of a plantation apart. The Chisums settled in Limestone County. The Logan Stroud family moved to Texas in the 1820s. Jane Harlan married Logan Stroud. Jane was related to Louis as a seventh-generation member of the Harlan family.

Jane Harlan Stroud, and her husband were owners of Melvin Chisum's mother Rachal Henderson, on the Stroud Plantation in Texas. Jane's father Joseph moved in 1837 to Robertson County, Texas, where he raised indigo, vegetables, and cattle. Robertson County is bounded on the north by Limestone County.¹³ Perhaps, Harlan's understanding of slavery is a metaphor for what he found or is the identification with legends in the Harlan family. In the *New York Times*, January 29, 2010, William Grimes wrote in an article, "Louis R. Harlan, Historian of Booker T. Washington, Dies, at 87," that "critics praised Mr. Harlan's skill at capturing

¹³ See Alpheus H. Harlan, *History and Genealogy of the Harlan Family and Particularly of the Descendants of George and Michael Harlan who Settled in Chester County, Pa., 1687* (Maryland: Lord Baltimore Press, nd., 1914?) Digitized for Microsoft Corporation by the Internet Archive in 2008 From the New York Public Library. Also see James Smallwood, "Black Texans During Reconstruction 1865-1874" (Texas Tech University, 1974), 37. See also *Handbook of Texas Online*, Art Leatherwood, "Stroud, Logan Almaren," accessed December 20, 2017, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fstak>

Washington's elusive character and getting a read on a personality that 'had vanished into the roles it had played,' as he once put it." Could Grimes' statement be true about Harlan himself? Did Harlan's personality as an historian vanish into a family role as he wrote of the Chisum family or BTW? Harlan was certainly aware of his lineage. In 1987 the Harlan Family in America created a nonprofit association to celebrate their family heritage since 1687. Louis Harlan wrote "Harlan Family in America: A Brief History."¹⁴ There are boxes in the Harlan collection that cannot be opened; perhaps, there is more information within them.

The idea that Harlan knew that Chisum's mother had once belonged to a family member and his mention that BTW and Chisum would "gag at nothing because of their slave past" leads to questions about the depiction of Chisum in the writing of Harlan. More simple associations come into question. For instance, why did Harlan use the description of Chisum as an elderly man shaped like an armadillo? Given that Chisum was born in the early 1870s, Chisum would have been only in his early thirties when he worked for BTW. That description came from a 1968 interview with G.W.A Scott done by Harlan himself and was used by his students as a standard view of Chisum. Pete Daniel repeats it in 1968 when he described Chisum as "like an armadillo" because of his bullet-proof vest, adding, "He

¹⁴ Fred Harlan, Harlan Family in America, Site Hosted by Aeneas, www.harlanfamily.org/book.htm. "A Brief History" was written by Louis R. Harlan.

was short, stubby, and ugly. He had a big belly . . . he was alleged to have carried a pistol all the time.”¹⁵ But the interview with Scott is taken out of context.

The rest of the story in the interview notes that Scott and Chisum had an altercation on the Tuskegee campus. According to his interview, Scott met Chisum in the 1930s. Chisum would have been in his sixties. Men change in appearance over thirty years. BTW died in 1915. BTW never knew the “plump little rogue in a bullet-proof vest” but a sleek man of affairs who looked years younger than a man in his thirties. This is a glaring mistake. If one opens the boxes of research long buried in the recesses of the archives at the UMD, the question of Dr. Chisum’s characterization of his father by Harlan takes on a new form for a researcher. The fact that Harlan had this information within the files raises questions of ambiguity in the characterization of Chisum in the historiography of the Harlan school on black American history.¹⁶

Thus, this biography undertakes Dr. Chisum’s challenge to rectify the scholarly characterization of Melvin Chisum and, additionally, wonders whether such an undertaking would indeed change the entire depiction of black activity in the age of BTW. Does it demonstrate a fissure in scholarship that could change or challenge the Harlan school’s understanding of Chisum and thereby open the door for more research on other blacks of the period? It also even brokers the question of

¹⁵ Harlan and Smock, *BTWP*, Vol. 8: 1904-1906, 7. Interview of G.W.A. Scott, 7 November 1968, Louis R. Harlan Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries, Box 26, Galley Proofs. Pete Daniels did the interview for Harlan.

¹⁶ Harlan Papers, Special Collections, UMD Libraries.
<http://hdl.handle.net/1903.1/1362>. Box 41.

whether Harlan's vision of BTW's life and work from Reconstruction to 1940 is accurate.¹⁷ If so, then developing a chronology of Chisum's work, which of necessity includes other Bookerites, could construct a more comprehensive understanding of the period.

Understanding the complexity of how Harlan recast BTW helps shed light on the historical debates about Melvin Chisum. Thus, in order to place Chisum in the narrative of black history, this dissertation focuses on BTW's biographer Louis Harlan. Harlan completed his doctoral work at Johns Hopkins University under his advisor C. Vann Woodward, author of *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (1955). While attending Johns Hopkins, Harlan met and befriended Dr. John Hope Franklin, the American black author of *The Militant South 1800–1861* (1956) and *From Slavery to Freedom* (1958). According to Raymond Smock, in memoriam, written in the American Historical Association (AHA) magazine in April 2010, the impact of the two mentors, particularly Franklin, led Harlan to devote his career to race relations and African American history.

As a professor at the Texas State College in 1958 Harlan published *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901–1915*. Through use of manuscripts, public documents, newspapers, and official reports, the book provided evidence that Southern states overtly ignored their

¹⁷ Theodore M. Pryor, *Wealth Building Lessons of Booker T. Washington for a New Black America* (Maryland: Duncan & Duncan, 1995), v. Maceo Crenshaw Dailey, *When the Saints Go Hobbling In: Emmett Jay Scott and the Booker T. Washington Movement* (El Paso, Texas: Sweet Earth Flying Press, 2013). These historians asked the same questions but did not have the information on Chisum to help them make a valid argument.

obligations to American black schools under the separate but equal doctrine. In 1965 Harlan moved to the University of Maryland College Park as a history professor. August Meier who used the BTW collection at the Library of Congress for his own book, *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (1963), urged Harlan to use the collection for his own research. According to David Levering Lewis, writing in memoriam of August A. Meier (1923-2003) in the AHA's *Perspectives in History*, by the end of the 1960s Meier held eminence in the field of American black history.

Ricki Moskowitz and Janice Quinter wrote in the introduction to the August Meier Papers for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York, that, "perhaps Meier's most far-reaching impact on the intellectual community has been achieved through his role as editor of books and other publications for four series in black studies."¹⁸ Meier's greatest impact on the historical community was achieved in his role as mentor. Meier's political background was, like A Phillip Randolph, (1889-1979) socialist. Moskowitz and Quinter described Meier's background as radical: his mother and father met through the socialist party and Meier was reared in a socialist community of reformers with backgrounds in socialism, communism, unionism, and various progressive educators, and anarchists.

¹⁸ August Meier Papers, SC MG 340, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library, @<http://archievesnypl.org/scm>.

Were the “civil-rights” historians objective and dispassionate about Bookerites? As the culture of WWII people turned from the Cold War to American civil and political unrest, most black history narratives were celebratory in nature, written by blacks that sought to emphasize in biography the heroic stature of black leaders. Post-WWII historians revised the genre of black historical study to fit a more modern philosophy of black assertion of their rights. Against the suggestions of American black professors in the 1960s, including historian P. Sterling Stuckey, who believed that blacks should write their own history, liberal and conservative whites such as C. Vann Woodward (1908-1999), August Meier (1923-2003), and Louis Harlan built the dominant schools of black history in the United States based on their interpretation of black suffrage.¹⁹ Reaching back, these scholars’ historical analysis changed the master narrative from racial uplift and reform to radical demands for equality, demands that included justice through agitation.

As uncontested leader in writing and editing black history in the 1960s-1980s, Meier set the dominant or mainstream narrative for BTW and his followers such as Chisum. A civil rights activist since his youth in the 1930s, Meier put in his prefaces of black history books (such as *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (1965)), anti-BTW rhetoric, and he incorporated the psychological terms of Jean Piaget (1896-1980)—“accommodation and assimilation”—to describe BTW’s agenda and to contrast it against W.E.B. DuBois’ more socialist-gearred reform. Meier pits BTW’s agenda against the one supported by influential white liberals and

¹⁹ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1983), 366-367.

socialists of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that favored political action; he depicted the two programs as if they were battles of right and wrong. In contrast Kelly Miller, a prominent black politician, mathematician, sociologist, and historian at Howard University who saw things differently. In *Race Adjustment: Essays on Negro America* (1908), he referred to the differences as “constructions,” not as accommodation and assimilation. He looked at BTW and Du Bois as two men “who agreed to the same end but differed on how to get there,” not as a monumental confrontation of uncompromising principles as Meier set in his commanding narrative. According to Miller, blacks were in line with radicals such as Du Bois, but also saw a place for solidarity, thrift, and institution as espoused by BTW. The generation of the 1960s created a black history which drew its perspective from a socialist leaders black and white who used the NAACP as the central piece in the essential narrative of black history. This dissertation contends that Harlan continued this thread of Meier’s philosophy.

In the 2010 American Historical Association magazine article, Raymond Smock, a coauthor with Harlan in the *Booker T. Washington Papers* (1973), gave details on why Harlan used Meier’s master narrative and redefined BTW’s story:

The mid-1960s, of course, was the height of the civil rights movement and the beginning of a major sea change in the attention and prominence given to African American history. Yet at this same time, Booker T. Washington’s image in the pantheon of significant black figures in American history was badly waning. Washington, the leader who accommodated to Jim Crow strictures in the late 19th and early 20th century, hardly seemed the stuff of heroes to a new generation of activists both black and white, who were agitating for an end to Jim Crow and demonstrating for full civil rights. Louis Harlan participated in the civil rights movement, marching in Montgomery with Martin Luther King Jr. and later marching and protesting against the

Vietnam War, all the while studying the life of the conservative Republican Booker T. Washington, who had rejected protest as a means to achieve social and political equality.²⁰

Harlan recast the self-made progressive mold of BTW and the men who supported his ideology of accommodation. The authentic Machiavellian-cum-Uncle Tom way of handling whites and other adversaries became a psychological problem of black leadership instead of a survival technique. The back book cover reads about Washington as if he were a bedlamite not a black man in a white world. They write positive about Harlan and recklessly about BTW. "A superb work of scholarship . . . To meet the challenge of a subject as complex, difficult and treacherous as Washington calls for a biographical talent of high honor. . . ." C Vann Woodward writes, "He brings to life a man of enormous complexity, an enigmatic figure who offends our era's sensibilities and refuses to meet our preconceived notions of how a great leader should behave," in the *Washington Post Book World*.²¹ The larger problem of how to combat violent racism was at stake. Possibly BTW had one way and Harlan simply could not or refused to look through BTW's lenses.²²

²⁰ Raymond Smock, "In Memoriam Louis R. Harlan," *Perspectives on History* 48, no. 4 (2010).

²¹ Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). The back cover presents a view of Washington as a man finally dismantled like a clown whose painted face is cleaned to reveal nothing but another dressed up Negro.

²² Steven Mintz and John Stauffer, *The Problem of Evil: Slavery Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform* (Amherst University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). Mintz's book sees this type of Reconstruction as a problem of evil. His goal is to resituate America in a bigger frame in order to look at American Black history.

It is my contention that Harlan, using the developing psychoanalytical history techniques of the late 1950s, concluded that conflicts occurring in a slave childhood formulated attributes in BTW's personality and provided an opening for him to accept Melvin Chisum as his personal friend and political ally. Contrary to Dr. Chisum's idea that "Harlan's vision was limited by what he could see from the correspondence he discovered, and that was not much," Harlan had quite a bit of information on Melvin Chisum.²³ In volume seven of the *Booker T. Washington Papers*, Harlan describes Melvin Chisum's career as businessman, journalist, and politician. The work Chisum did for BTW from 1903 to 1915 as spy and provocateur and his continued support of BTW's accommodation fit the narrative of the "new-left" revisionist model that the accommodationists were backward, debased leaders. It seems that Harlan chose specific letters to use, and by leaving out others, he and others recast Melvin Chisum as an antagonist and traitor to his race instead of the politician that was his actual legacy.

Harlan developed the narrative further by twisting BTW's black "Uncle Tom" Machiavellian-style of leadership into a psycho-historical problem. Harlan extended this social psychosis into the development of the relationship between BTW and Chisum. He blamed BTW's friendship with Chisum on BTW's upbringing and slave past.

C. Vann Woodward and Meier as mentors maneuvered Harlan into their version of black history. Harlan in turn indoctrinated and influenced Raymond

²³ Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 23 June 2005. OKCU.

Smock, Stephen Fox, David Levering Lewis, Pete Daniels, Brian Kelly, and other historians in his generation into his interpretation, which developed and described the relationship between BTW and Chisum as psychologically disturbed. Under the advisement of Louis Harlan, the trail of the newly developed Chisum characterization starts in 1970 with the publication of Stephen R. Fox's, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter*. Fox named three professors—Arthur Zilversmit, August Meier, and Louis Harlan—who helped him publish his manuscript. Fox explained in his preface that Harlan “helped me find a publisher, permitted me to read an unpublished paper of his on Booker T. Washington, and finally gave a critical reading to my manuscript in its penultimate form.”²⁴ In his research Fox accessed the W.E.B. Du Bois papers privately held in the custody of Herbert Aptheker, who published *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* in 1951. In his book, Aptheker labeled Chisum “self-styled as an efficiency engineer” who was against the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP).²⁵

Review of Literature

Except for the socialist magazine, *The Messenger*, historiographical research in books and papers in the early twentieth century did not portray Chisum as a traitor to his race. As Washington's spy-cum-man-of-affairs from 1903 until 1915,

²⁴ Stephen Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter*, ed. August Meier, *Studies in American Negro Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), Preface.

²⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (Pennsylvania State University: Citadel Press, 1951), 635. Now accessible through archives, these primary sources, particularly the Walter White papers, give a clearer story of Melvin Chisum's later years.

Chisum had access to every president from William McKinley to Franklin Roosevelt. Some letters to and from them are in the presidential files in the Library of Congress. Raymond Smock co-edited *A Guide to Manuscripts in the Presidential Libraries* with Dennis Burton and James Rhoads in 1985.²⁶ Completed in 1937, the National Archives in Maryland hold congressional papers. The NAACP papers were in the Library of Congress in 1964, available and processed by 1978 in the Manuscript Division. Joseph Sullivan and Michael Miller prepared *The Harold Ickes Papers* in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress in 2005. However, Ickes' diary was in the files of the Library of Congress. Back copies of the *Afro American Newspapers* lay available in the Maryland office archives. Wendell Dabney's *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others* (1927) was available in libraries of American black colleges in the form of the *Negro Caravan's* "Visit to Dunbar's Tomb" in 1941. All of these manuscripts portrayed Chisum as loyal to his race and party platform. Historically black colleges and universities in the 1970s had Monroe Work's *The Negro Yearbook and Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro* (1913), and copies of the *Negro Caravan* ((1941) on their shelves, as well as *The Mulatto in the United States* (1918), *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens* (1927), and Robert Russa Moton's autobiography *Finding a Way Out* (1920). Howard University remains only a few miles from the University of Maryland College Park and the National Archives.

The research of Stephen Fox set the anti-Chisum stage for the students of the Harlan school with the first book in modern times to judge Chisum as "niggardly."

²⁶ Dennis Burton, Raymond Smock, and James Rhoads, *A Guide to Manuscripts in the Presidential Libraries* (University of Michigan: Research Materials Corp, 1985).

Fox also used the Charles M. Story and William H. Lewis papers, the James Weldon Johnson and Walter White papers, and the Henry Cabot Lodge papers that he obtained through their families. Fox's use of newspaper articles on Chisum's character shows that there were other sources available for these historians writing American black history in the 1970s. The Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., family and Chisum, Sr.'s papers were accessible in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In the 1970s, Dr. Chisum had a private medical practice in internal medicine at 245 North Broad Street in Philadelphia. His wife, Gloria Twine Chisum, worked at the Naval Air Development Center as an expert in visual performance and perception. For years newspapers, magazines, and journals carried stories of her awards and prizes in the field of science and philanthropy. Dr. Gloria Chisum won the "Black Engineer of the Year" award in 1989. However, the historians chose to cast or frame Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr.'s work and legacy based on the character, reputation, and ideology they were creating about BTW; they did not consult the Chisum family – they certainly consulted other families – about accuracy. Fox also based his character on oral history gleaned from men such as Percival Prattis, who lived during the period, but who had little association with Chisum.

Fox turned to Harlan, Harlan's notes, and Harlan's estimate of Chisum instead of doing an interview with the Chisum family. Fox wrote that "Washington's secret campaign against Trotter began early in September 1903 with the espionage efforts of a New York Bookerite named Melvin J. Chisum. Chisum was a man of no particular distinction"; a few years later Washington's best friend in New York remarked that Chisum "has made up his mind not to work, and expects to live by

borrowing.” The “Chisum Trail” became one of adding to Harlan’s negative depiction of Chisum. Fox added that in 1916 the *New York Age* reported that Chisum had fled from a criminal libel conviction in Oklahoma. But in 1903 his casual unscrupulousness made him a “good henchman-errand boy for Tuskegee.”²⁷

Jervis Anderson, a Jamaican-born historian and journalist, wrote *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* in 1972. It is the best overall report on the Pullman porter crisis in the black community. In his research on “Negro unionism,” the Afrocentric historian calls the Chisum of the 1920s a “prominent Chicago politician,” “who advised porters they would be better off relying upon the goodwill of the Pullman company.” Anderson did not use the anti-hero jargon associated with Chisum’s stance against the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). Anderson provides an overall look at the Pullman porter conflict by including the point of view of the black churches, the black press, the black community, the socialist-backed *Messenger* magazine of Randolph and Chandler, and black leaders both for and against the unionization of porters.

In *Essays on the Age of Enterprise* (1974), labor historian David Brody followed the Harlan school in 1974 by using the exact wording of “spy and provocateur” that Harlan would use in his 1977 publication of the *Booker T. Washington Papers*. Harlan mentions two of his colleagues and students at the end of his description of Chisum as spy and provocateur. He writes that, for more information on Chisum, the reader should consult Pete Daniel, “Black Power in the

²⁷ Fox, *The Guardian of Boston*, 57.

1920s: The Case of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital,” in the *Journal of Southern History* (August 1970), and William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37* (1977).

Daniel was a student of Harlan, Harris a black educator.

William Harris continued the negative depiction of Chisum in *Keeping the Faith*. The book was originally published in 1925. A namesake possibly published the original copy of the book. An attempt to find the original author was unsuccessful. William Harris could not have been the original author because he was not born until 1945. The original manuscript did not have the description of Chisum from Percival Prattis. It did give information that Chisum was loyal to the Pullman porters because of his personal relationship with George Pullman who had hired him when he was a boy to be a porter. Like Fox’s use of the erroneous sources, Harris used the Prattis interview in the re-edited 1977 version of the book. In the new edition published by the University of Illinois Press, Harris described Chisum as the “smoothest of a large group of underhanded operators in Chicago during the 1920s; he [Chisum] had a long history of secretive and unprincipled missions for pay.” Harris earned his M.A. and Ph.D. from Indiana University and taught history there from 1972 to 1982. Harris did not use Chisum’s political or journalistic reputation to describe Chisum for his book, but indicated he interviewed Percival L. Prattis, a “ne’re-do-well journalist.” Early on Prattis was a Chicago publisher of *Heebie Jeebies: A Sign of Intelligence* and a colleague of Chisum’s at the National

Negro Press Association (NNPA) in the 1920s.²⁸ Yet, somehow, with all the primary and secondary sources related to Chisum in the generation tied to the Harlan school, the Prattis interview and one by G.W.A. Scott, a teacher at Tuskegee High School, became the most noteworthy sources on Chisum.

Henry P. Guzda's article, "Labor Department's First Program to Assist Black Workers," appeared in the magazine *Monthly Labor Review* in June 1982. The article supports Moton's autobiographical data on Chisum as an efficiency engineer from an article in the *Southern Workman* labor magazine in 1920. The article does not name Chisum but discusses a letter he wrote to George E. Haynes, the head of the Division of Negro Economics for the United States government during World War I. Chisum's name is included in the footnotes. Guzda describes Chisum as a high-ranking official of Tuskegee who worked for the government as an efficiency agent. The article described Chisum's work in Mobile, Alabama, where black workers were "exploited to the degree of slavery." This exploitation of workers was the same information that Dabney writes about in this book *Chisum's Pilgrimage* and *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens* as positive for the war effort and business.

Despite the Harlan school, African American biographies in the 1980s continued to cast Chisum as a hero of the civil rights movements in the Progressive and New Deal eras. Roy Wilkins was a well-known civil rights leader in the mid-twentieth century. In his autobiography, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy*

²⁸ Harris, *Keeping the Faith*, 53. Prattis later published the *New Pittsburgh Courier* after Robert Vann (one of the Big Four in 1932) in 1941. Prattis was on the local board of the NNPA with Chisum in 1927.

Wilkins (1982), Wilkins regards Chisum as a civil rights leader who could make or break a black newspaper. Wilkins edited the *Northwestern Bulletin* in 1922. As field agent for the NNPA, Chisum, to Wilkins' delight, supported the instrument of civil rights. Wilkins succeeded W.E.B. Du Bois as editor of the *Crisis* magazine, an instrument of the NAACP.

The same year, 1982, John Hope Franklin and August Meier published the book, *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*. Whereas Wilkins admired Chisum and was delighted with the support Chisum gave to young men seeking to be civil rights leaders, Franklin and Meier were of the Harlan school, denigrating Chisum's work as that of a spy and provocateur. Franklin and Meier, like Stephen Fox in *The Guardian of Boston*, wrote into the narrative that BTW hired a young black man, Melvin J. Chisum, to infiltrate the inner councils of Trotter's anti-BTW organization in Boston. The authors continued the narrative that Harlan school writers began as part of their framework and included information that Chisum later spied on the Brooklyn branch of the Niagara Movement, arranged to bribe an opposition newspaper editor in Washington, and reported these and other clandestine actions to BTW on a park bench in New York City.²⁹

The struggle to integrate, to define, and to control the dominant narrative of black histories seemed to be won in 1983 when Harlan published his second volume on BTW, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*. His revisionist motif became the gold standard for BTW's life and the dominant narrative for black

²⁹ Harlan, *Wizard of Tuskegee*. 98.

histories about the African American experience 1896-1940. Contrary to the way BTW wrote of himself the Harlan school described him as a complex, ambiguous man. Important figures in 1950s history who were also Harlan's mentors supported the new BTW. C. Vann Woodward called the redefined BTW "complex, difficult and treacherous," in his *New York Times* book review. The *Washington Post* reviewer discovered that BTW was "an enigmatic figure who offends our era's sensibilities and refuses to meet our preconceived notions of how a great leader should behave." Harlan suggested to Marjorie Hunter of the *New York Times* in 1984 that he personally may not have liked BTW for having so "many personalities."³⁰

According to various historians, Harlan, by unmasking BTW, lifted himself to new heights in academia. In Harlan's interpretation, BTW descended from a black icon to an unlikable psychotic. The *Washington Post* reviewer, Matt Schudel, justified Harlan's redefinition of BTW. Schudel wrote that blacks disfavored BTW because of his stance on accommodation. The Harlan school also cast another character as an anti-hero, a lecherous villain, and spy—Melvin Chisum. Dr. Quintard Taylor at the University of Washington placed Chisum's narrative in his *20th Century African American History Manual* as an espionage agent.

A new version of Chisum began to pop up, however, one that challenged the whole Harlan interpretation of BTW, the idea of accommodation, and the activities of Melvin Chisum. Gloria T. Hull's description of Chisum in *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar Nelson* (1984) was contrary to Harlan's depiction in the

³⁰ Marjorie Hunter. "A Pulitzer Biographer's 30-Year Labor of Love," *New York Times*, (New York), 10 May 1984.

Wizard of Tuskegee and Quintard Taylor's assessment of Chisum in his history class as an espionage agent for Tuskegee. When Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Alice Dunbar were married, they lived in an apartment with Chisum in New York. Alice Dunbar continued her relationship with Chisum in her third marriage to Robert J. Nelson. Nelson was a civil rights activist that Chisum supported monetarily and backed through political means. Contrary to Harlan, Alice Dunbar Nelson in her diary describes Chisum as a behind-the-scenes civil rights activist supportive, strong enough to pull a car out of muddy ditch, and a leader of American blacks in the 1930s. Her diary points to Chisum working in the background as her husband grew more powerful as an activist. Nelson's diary proves her husband became a civil rights leader through Chisum's covert work for him.

Another historian, Donald Lisio, who wrote *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (1985), examined Chisum's legacy outside of the Harlan school. He described Chisum's activism for civil rights during the Herbert Hoover administration. Instead of a spy and provocateur, Lisio described Chisum as "a well known, Chicago conservative, who, however, opposed black unions." When Chisum opposed Hoover over the treatment of American blacks, Lisio documented the same image of Chisum that Roy Wilkins, Alice Nelson, and Johnson did in their books.

Vanessa Gamble in *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920-1945* picks up Lisio's motif. Gamble's research places Chisum with the leaders of the black hospital movement including the members of the NAACP. Using many of the same sources which Harlan and his students had access to,

Gamble developed a less-biased view of Chisum and his work as an efficiency engineer.

But despite a few positive characterizations, the damage to Chisum's reputation continued. For example, using the same information as Gamble, Pete Daniel as a student of Harlan's, in his article "Black Power in the 1920s: The Case of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," understood Chisum as the person who broke the critical standoff at Tuskegee University in the 1920s. Daniel used the psychohistory idea that Chisum was "psychic" in his work instead of a man proficient as a race leader and efficiency engineer. In Daniel's footnotes are references to Harlan's BTW papers. Daniel found pleasure in adding a note that "Harlan was apparently unaware of the period during which Chisum worked for TCI [Tennessee Coal and Iron Company]—an appointment apparently secured for him by Moton through his long relationship with the company's management." The Harlan group seemed to take pleasure in finding negative information about Chisum.

As the twenty-first century approached, a few historians looked outside of the Harlan school and back to the pre-1965 era for their descriptions of Chisum. Their efforts tend to develop a different legacy for Melvin Chisum. Blanche Cook in *Eleanor Roosevelt: Defining Years 1933-1938* (1999) wrote that Chisum was part of a think tank of black leadership in the United States under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In 2001, Beth Bates, in *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925 -1945*, included Chisum as one of the best-educated black men in the country along with Benjamin E. Mays, president emeritus of Morehouse College. She

relates the story of the porter strike and Chisum's relationships with the George Pullman family. She plants Melvin Chisum, as a member of the NNPA, in a larger community of labor aristocrats, including Perry Howard, Republican national committeeman from Mississippi, Jesse Binga, head of Binga State Bank in Chicago, and J. Finley Wilson, grand exalted ruler of the Elks, all of whom were grateful to the Pullman company for hiring them when most employers excluded African Americans.

In 2003, Marcus Pohlmann wrote *Capitalism versus Collectivism: The Colonial Era to 1945*, which describes Melvin Chisum as a self-styled efficiency engineer. His book is a comprehensive collection of major and minor leaders in American black politics. Paul Bernstein in *Letters to Eleanor: Voices of the Great Depression* (2004) writes of Chisum as one of a number of black leaders. Refuting Brian Kelley's article that became a book in 2000, William Griffin in *African Americans and the Color Line* (2005) revisits the issue of labor recruiting that Brian Kelly describes in *Race, Class, and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (2001). Griffin suggests that Joseph L. Jones and Chisum founded a Cincinnati employment agency that became a labor-recruiting center for northern manufacturers and munitions plants during the war. Kelly, a student of Harlan wrote that Chisum sought cheap black labor from the South. He adds into his footnotes the excerpt of the description in Harlan's *Booker T. Washington Papers*. Kelly went a step further – writing as if his discovery-merited accolades - that Harlan was unaware of Chisum's work for Tennessee Coal and Iron.

Had Kelly researched the Harlan papers he would have found that his mentor Harlan knew but chose not to publish the information. Raymond Arsenault wrote *Marian Anderson, the Lincoln Memorial and the Concert that Awakened America* (2009), in which he traced Chisum's work as race leader and field secretary of the NNPA and his efforts that helped Harold Ickes get Marian Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial. Shawn Alexander in *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle before the NAACP* (2012) focused on Chisum's work as BTW's agent, who infiltrated the Brooklyn branch of the Niagara Movement, but not as a spy and provocateur.³¹

Chisum's positive role was not acknowledged by the Harlan school. As late as 2009 historian Raymond Smock, considered a BTW scholar for his work in assisting Louis Harlan in his award-winning works, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915* and *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, continues Harlan's tradition of treating Chisum as a nineteenth- and twentieth-century villain. Not only does Smock adversely evaluate Chisum but also within three sentences adds insult to injury by spelling Chisum's surname incorrectly. This affront occurs in the Library of African-American Biography Series book, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow*, in which Smock writes comparatively about Chisum and other spies:

It [Niagara Movement] was infiltrated by an even greater number of Washington's spies, including Richard T. Greener, a Harvard graduate, and a shady character named Melvin Jack Chissum [*sic*] whom Washington had

³¹ Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2012).

employed in 1903 to spy on Monroe Trotter. Chissum [*sic*] would become a regular fixture in Washington's secret efforts to keep an eye on his critics, often meeting him on park benches in New York and in other cities to get his instructions. Acting the role of the espionage agent to the hilt, including carrying a concealed weapon and occasionally wearing a bulletproof vest, the obsequious Chissum [*sic*] would sign his letters to Washington with flourishes such as "I am, Your obedient humble servant, Chissum [*sic*], to do with as your Eminence desires, absolutely."³²

Smock belittled Chissum for his attitude of humbleness before the American black king and perhaps played on the "possum" shape of his figure with "Chissum."³³

The revision of Chissum's life by the Harlan school illustrates that historians have biases in their writing of history. Like casting a play, pioneer historians chose characters from the Progressive Era for roles that were acceptable during the post-civil rights movement. The era of writing symbolized a civil rights perspective. John Hope Franklin referred to the ritual of casting in the preface of his publication, *From Slavery to Freedom* (1990). He wrote that the procedure of writing black history involved a "discreet balance between recognizing the deeds of outstanding persons and depicting the fortunes of the great mass of Negroes . . . where dominant personalities forged to the front and assumed roles of responsibility and leadership."³⁴ Somehow, Chissum did not fit the criteria for the classic role of black leadership.

³² Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow*, ed. John David Smith, The Library of African-American Biography (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 181.

³³ *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xii.

The 1970s biographers in the Harlan School cast Melvin Jackson Chisum only as a villain, a simple one-dimensional character based on his work for BTW at Tuskegee.³⁵ They then added the anti-hero information about Chisum as they found it in history. Historians developed their own black heroes based on their interpretation of what history should have been. Initially, they needed a story, but now there were enough resources to include the dimensions they, purposefully or not, left out to dismiss American black leaders who they believed did not seek justice and the moral and material improvement of American blacks. Chisum did not fit their mold, so he was left out, recast, or reduced to a caricature. Reclaiming the full character of American black history includes wrestling with Chisum and adding back into the narrative that BTW's death did not end accommodation.

The Machiavellian-cum-Uncle Tom act remained in black circles as a way of dealing with people in racist political and social arenas. It was developed by blacks to survive in a racist world; it was not a psychological problem of American blacks in Chisum's era, as forwarded in narratives of the Harlan school. In order to make BTW more digestible for whites and blacks in the civil rights movement, Harlan admittedly tampered with the BTW character in his narrative because he wanted to use his histories as tools for social reconstruction. Instead of revealing that BTW used Machiavellian tactics of slave resistance or the Uncle Tom persona to manipulate white society, Harlan readjusted BTW's character to that of a complex personality with a damaged psyche manifesting itself in unstable behavior. In manipulating Washington's character, Harlan also altered the reputation of Chisum

³⁵ Harlan and Smock, *BTWP*, Vol. 8: 1904-1906, 77.

to show BTW was deranged enough to accept Chisum as a closely regarded friend. Only a socialist news magazine during labor union conflicts labeled Chisum as a traitor. Only another spy labeled Chisum as lecherous in the BTW papers. Both were picked up by the Harlan school as objective truth about his nature in historiography.

In her 1995 book, *Making A Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920 – 1945*, Vanessa Gamble described Chisum as “Field Secretary for the National Negro Press Association who played such a prominent role. . . .”³⁶ As well, Blanche Cook in *Eleanor Roosevelt: Defining Years 1933 – 1938*, recounted that Chisum was part of the think tank of black leadership under the Roosevelt administration. Other historians wrote of Chisum and their research showed his worth in history. Beth Bates’s *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925 – 1945*, (2001), Marcus Pohlman’s *Capitalism vs. Collectivism: The Colonial Era to 1945, African American Political Thought*, (2003), Paul Bernstein’s, *Letters to Eleanor: Voices of the Great Depression* (2004), William Griffin’s *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915-1930* (2005), Raymond Arsenault’s *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait*, (2009), and Shawn Alexander’s *An Army Of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (2012) all give truthful and objective accounts of Melvin Chisum.

There is no overall explanation as to why these twenty-first century historians chose their depictions of Chisum despite the dominant narrative of the Harlan school. They are all from different universities, some from departments

³⁶ Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 80, 82, 97.

other than history. Though they have different interpretations of Chisum than the Harlan school, their work for historical clarity does not mean the influence of the Harlan school is over. Perhaps the new more truthful and objective descriptions mean a new school of historians has already begun, --which includes a reassessment of accommodation as well--but because we are in the midst of the change it has not yet been named or recognized.

With truth and objectivity, the real legacy of Melvin Chisum's history will impact social, labor, and racial history, allowing for a more comprehensive study of American history to be written. Twenty-first century historians will show that the Harlem Renaissance will no longer pervade the understanding of the dynamics and ethos of black America in the 1920s. Room will be made for a legitimate historical view of an earlier civil rights agenda that was being built in both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party as well in labor, through men such as Chisum and Nelson who set the final stage of the civil rights movement that started in 1940 at the death of Robert Russa Moton.

This attempt of adding Chisum on the national level and minor characters on the state level, such as Oklahomans Dr. Isaac William Young, (1873-1937) and William Twine (1860-1933), and the white leaders, preachers, industrialists, and politicians who worked with them, will focus on and analyze an evolving pattern of race relations that brought a new order to America by 1940, showing how fitting the life of Chisum into the puzzle of battling Jim Crow and racism during the Progressive Era and the New Deal years aids in developing a comprehensive picture of black

activism. Inserting into history the life of Melvin Chisum brings alive the people and ideas of the time period from 1873 to the 1930s.

In this dissertation, the name of Booker T. Washington is shortened to the initials BTW because using his last name is many times confused in this instrument with Washington D.C. Using all capitals gives homage to him as the great man he continues to be in our memory. Each chapter brings into perspective the life of Melvin Chisum beyond his work for BTW.

This Chapter 1 serves as an introduction. *Discerning the Truth From the Dead*, takes the challenge of the late Melvin Chisum, Jr., to research and analyze whether the theory of Harlan about his father was shortsighted. Using Dr. Chisum's query it demonstrates that research has uncovered several discrepancies in the character of Chisum painted by Harlan's pen. Therefore, the depiction of Chisum as a spy and provocateur at the height of his career is reopened for interpretation. The chapter examines Harlan's objectivity as well as reviews Harlan's lineage in juxtaposition to Chisum's family lineage. Ties are found that lead to more in depth investigation in chapter 3.

Chapter 2, *Concepts in Black History, Faithful Witness: Chisum, the Social Gospel and American Civil Religion*, lays a foundation for defining the courageous "risk taking" characteristics Chisum became known for in his lifetime. While both his son and daughter want readers to know he was not an avid churchgoer; Chisum developed within him the behaviors that came from a tradition of the social gospel. These practices led to giving one's life for others, no matter the risk. The chapter

develops the idea that Chisum was a mystic who practiced the black social gospel under the umbrella of the American Black Civil Religion. His practice can be seen in the same praxes of Sojourner Truth and other black heroes.

Chapter 3, *Background, It is not the Size of the Dog in the Fight but the Size of the Fight in the Dog*, covers the background and meaningful associations Melvin Chisum made as a young man that helped him become a race man, spy, and eventually an investigator for the Public Works Administration in the New Deal. It is the narrative of his childhood influences that made him a man of steel. Chisum was born post-Civil War in one of the toughest parts of the country for freedmen to survive. He cast himself as Texas Steel and literally boxed his way out of the South as “Texas Red Bud,” a prize-winning pugilist. He formed intimate attachments to whites such as George Pullman and blacks such as BTW and Bishop William Derrick, that guided and helped him gain prestige, positions, and later emerge during the Progressive Era a top black politician in the Democratic Party.

Chapter 4, *The Stroke of a Pen, The Villainization of Melvin Chisum*, unravels the caricature of the Booker T. Washington – Chisum relationship developed by Harlan as one of “moral insensitivity.” The chapter revisits the question of Harlan’s description of Chisum furthering research in the Master’s Thesis, “Driving Black American: Melvin Jackson Chisum Sr., African American Kingmaker.” Using Harlan’s own archived research from the University of Maryland College Park storage, the chapter continues to question Harlan’s description of Chisum’s relationship as close to the Tuskegee Machine. It takes a look at the caricatures that Harlan used for BTW.

Harlan used ideas of mystics such as in the story of Camelot including wizards, and wizard's lamps - that called to genies- to describe the black ethic. A study Black Machiavellians shows that Brer Rabbit, Emmett Scott, BTW, Chisum and most black leaders using the mask of Uncle Tom were wizards attempting to escape Jim Crow in the United States of America. The chapter takes Chisum's life into the early 1910s as he developed into an entrepreneur as a real estate agent in New York.

Chapter 5, *Chisum's Pilgrimage in Oklahoma, Where the Wind Comes Sweeping Down the Plains*, moves Chisum's life into the pivotal moments when he loosens ties with the Tuskegee Machine and starts to move around the country developing his notoriety as a journalist and his hobby of rescuing the poor. His rescues were more in the order of black mystics of the black social gospel, Sojourner Truth, Harriett Tubman, and Toussaint L 'Overture. Unlike Robin Hood, Chisum did not take from the rich and give to the poor. He literally held his neck up for the lynching rope, to aid blacks in escaping black leaders who abused other blacks. He took the risk of going against a system mired in criminal conspiracy and Jim Crow. This chapter takes another look at Chisum's attack on Langston University president Inman Page and establishes his part in the court case that followed. It highlights how Chisum's newspaper, the first black newspaper in Oklahoma City, *The Oklahoma Tribune*, became a catalyst for the civil rights movement through Roscoe Dunjee's rise as editor of the *Black Dispatch* in a fight against Chisum's espionage. It broadens the narrative of the childhood friendship between Chisum and Dr. Isaac William Young as Chisum sets the stage for Young's rise to becoming Oklahoma's "First Black Governor" in 1921 and a national black leader in the 1930s.

Chapter 6, *Melvin Chisum in the 1920s, Service, Service, Service*, picks up from Chisum's pivotal moment in Oklahoma and guides the reader into Chisum's life after the death of BTW. The chapter changes the historical narrative set by Harlan's School on BTW. His influence did not die with him. It shows how some lieutenants of the Tuskegee Machine continued to work within the United States government carrying out BTW's agenda into the 1930s. The chapter continues to show the break down between Chisum and the Tuskegee Machine and picks up with Emmett Scott as leader of the remaining Bookerites. It suggests changes at Tuskegee and changes in Chisum. The chapter takes Chisum beyond being a World War I efficiency agent for the U. S. Employment Service Division of Negro Economics (covered in my master's thesis, "Driving Black America: Melvin Jackson Chisum Sr. An African American "Kingmaker.") It looks at Chisum within the politics during the rise of the "lily-white" agenda in both the Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge Presidential administrations. Emphasis is made on Chisum's relationships, his marriage, family, and his nemeses including Mays Benjamin of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Oscar De Priest, a rising, black, Republican politician in the fourth ward in Chicago. The chapter develops and shapes Chisum's developing career under Samuel Insull.

Chapter 7, *The Tuskegee Veterans Hospital Crisis, You May Come This Far: But Come No Further, (Job 38:11): Chisum and the Tuskegee Veteran's Hospital Crisis*, specifically gives an account of Chisum's mission to aid the Warren Harding administration, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), James Weldon Johnson, and Robert Russa Moton in bringing about an all-

black administration at the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. The chapter offers a closer look at Chisum's practice of detective work. It demonstrates his capacity to confront leading black politicians who attacked Tuskegee, and shows development of his acumen and skills for his work over his lifetime. The episode foreshadows Chisum's 1930s unveiling; his gradual movement from performing undercover work for pay – to the highest bidder – to his accomplishments in overt political work.

Chapter 8, *Crossing Over Tripping Up, the end of Accommodation*, discusses the final movement of BTW's lieutenants into the Progressive Era reform. They left the Republican Party for a New Deal within President Franklin Roosevelt's administration only to find the same old deal. Chisum's rise to be the most powerful black in the United States is the climax of the chapter. Using letters written between Chisum and Dr. Isaac William Young of Oklahoma, the chapter introduces the newly discovered primary sources that show the work of black Democrats in the patronage system on the local, state, and national level. These give an intimate view of blacks who left the Republican Party believing Democrats would support them. After all the years of playing Brer Rabbit and escaping the farmer, the farmer caught Brer Rabbit, by luring them in and then – fencing the ranch. Some historians believe that the end of the social gospel period ended under the New Deal. Chisum writes that the period was the end of the Progressive Era. For Chisum and other black leaders the transformation became one from the black social gospel into a liberation theology. Liberation theology grew from the social gospel. Once Bookerites joined the other black political factions in the 1930s they took overt action instead of accommodation. Because of the New Deal wizardry, "warwickism" was swapped for

assertiveness. They would have to fight their way out and with this paradigm change created the modern civil rights movement.

Forward

Almost fifty years after the publication of “Secret Life of Booker T. Washington,” and the introduction to Chisum in the *Booker T. Washington Papers*, as a spy and provocateur, scholars continue to probe for answers about the real Melvin Chisum. Louis Harlan legitimized and defined the study of American black history for the world. His work kept the Bookerites’ work in the classroom in the twentieth century. Its pull was so weighty that few questioned its accuracy until a plea from the late Dr. Melvin Chisum to clear his father’s name came together with access to new sources provided by digitization, which allowed the task to be undertaken. James Smallwood’s work impacted both threads of historiography and led back to the journalists of the 1920s and earlier. Modern scholars need answers and like Chisum’s son seek a vision of Chisum that is not distorted and a view of BTW that is not twisted. This is an attempt at a biographical sketch of the life of Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr., and an understanding black politics in the Progressive Era, of a time when Bookerites became a part of the civil rights movement and why they did. That information has gone unrecognized.

Louis Harlan’s research on Melvin Chisum was not the central reason for writing his books. However, the development of Chisum as no more than spy or provocateur, and the recollections of his career in the narratives of the Harlan

school need to be adjusted. Black historians portrayed Chisum in the last of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century as a race leader, hero and politician. I contend as well that only after BTW's lieutenants like Chisum who were still deeply embedded and entrenched in government networks, attempted to make accommodation work from within the Roosevelt administration and failed, could the Civil Rights Movement arise and grasp and hold the nation's attention as "the" movement of American Blacks. Thus, the dissertation recalculates the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement based on BTW's influence through his lieutenants that remained in government and private political circles after his death. Robert Russa Moton held the major influence in keeping accommodation alive. Within a month of Robert Russa Moton's death the Baltimore *Afro American* newspaper made a bold statement when it published the new leaders of black reform. Backed by Chisum, the first picture that ever appeared of W.E.B DuBois and his family was published in July 1940. One month later Walter White and his family were presented. The culmination of BTW's work of accommodation and civilization building by his lieutenants had ended. These newspaper items symbolized a paradigm shift between Bookerites and more liberal blacks. They came together as one. The factions of the black leadership (chapter 5) became one. Agitation not accommodation was the new voice of the movement for justice, liberty and equality.

CHAPTER II

FAITHFUL WITNESS TO LIBERATION

CHISUM, THE SOCIAL GOSPEL, AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Melvin Chisum, Sr. spoke at Second Baptist Church in McKinney, Texas, “Declaring that the colored man should be more religious than other races because his blessings had been great, but deploring the superstition that had grown up around Negro Church activities, the speaker’s (Chisum) final conclusions were, that the black folks must have more “seven-day in the week home training” and “less Sunday shouting religion.”

---*McKinney Daily Courier Gazette*, 23 June 1916

In order to understand Chisum and the world of blacks in the first quarter of the twentieth century, one needs to understand the development of the “black social gospel” and “American Black Civil Religion.” Historians tend to superimpose the theories of a dominant, Anglo-Saxon, upper class, social gospel movement over the entire social gospel movement across the span of American history from the mid 1800s to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. While it is true that the social gospel movement at the end of nineteenth and turn of the twentieth century inspired reform movements which included government reforms in the work place and even in personal spheres, the leadership of those factions choose to address

equality on an unequal basis. Their works were impeded and limited in American society, because the church and the educational sectors allowed racism, sexism, and classism in a one-sided quasi-Christian gospel. This chapter identifies the efforts of common people on the fringes of the Social Gospel Movement, reevaluates the Black Social Gospel, and defines the American Civil Religion that supported it.

An American Civil Religion exists in the United States of America. Robert Bellah, American sociologist, wrote, "While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of (the American Way of Life), few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America."¹ Early American multi-dimensional societies created racial separation and ultimately separate but equal laws. Under the umbrella of Protestant religious culture, American Blacks continued outside as well as within the mainline church acts of the Black Social Gospel. Separated spaces allowed for blacks to create their own American Civil Religion. In their own sphere blacks celebrated Emancipation Proclamation Day, Juneteenth, and Third of April rather than just the American Independence Day on July 4. Following the black newspapers, church experiences, and books of the period shows that the national black community had their own heroes, holidays, folklore, and literature. Modernity is still discovering the rubrics of the different dimensions. They are evidenced in research on Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr.

¹ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967). 1.

How did separation and their own American Civil Religion affect the social gospel of American blacks, American Asians, and other cultures? It created different domains in which to discover freedom, justice, and liberty. Because most blacks were slaves then later encased in a Jim Crow framework “truth” was not a really tangible entity. Women like Sojourner Truth were involved in quasi – Christian movements such as women’s suffrage. When the time came to give all women equality of the vote in America, her Anglo-Saxon counterparts left American black women behind. Blacks had been left behind in the growth of the United States.

In regards to Chisum he understood that the “truth” of black people was distorted as a child. His family member, Merritt Trammell, known to freedmen and the first generation of freeborn blacks a hero, preacher, and lawman, was characterized in the newspapers and by state leaders as an outlaw (chapter 3). During and after slavery and into the modern era, the Anglo churches and their revivalists developed theological distortions and to keep blacks unequal. Even in some mainline denominations until the 1920s only whites could pastor black mainline churches, thereby keeping the power of the white person’s God in white hands. From slavery and into the 1970s this distortion of gospel was force-fed to blacks. For an example while attending desegregated schools in Virginia many learned for the first time that American black ancestors were slaves because of the Ham Doctrine. Even though elementary school historians forced the narratives on children, by the 1970s some black pastors were educated enough, though black colleges, to repudiate the myth.

To borrow a term from Melvin Chisum in 1916 and Carter G. Woodson in 1933, Blacks were intentionally “mis-educated” by liberal pastors. Biblical passages such as “slaves obey your master” in 1 Peter 2:18, were distorted by pastors ignoring accompanying texts used in the black social gospel like John 8:36 that read “whom the Son sets free is free indeed.” Chisum was preaching/speaking at churches during the same time period that he began literally moving blacks to the North. Chisum indicated this mis-education in his 1916 speech before a mixed audience at Second Baptist Church in McKinney, Texas. He said, “There is no reason why the black man should not have given evidence of all the fine qualities of the white man, but for the fact that his education has been wrong and his leaders are responsible therefore.”² He incorporated the black social gospel biblical emphasis of freedom into his own life. In 1915 Chisum escaped Oklahoma alive by sheer will against almost insurmountable odds. By 1916 he was dodging warrants for his arrest for absconding by night to the North with Southern workers (chapter 5).

Laws against educating blacks stifled their spiritual as well as their secular growth. In spite of this, the “Holy Spirit” of the Judeo-Christian God met them as slaves and freedmen and spiritually freed them. For some, hundreds of years after their capture, this knowledge fit the religious praxis rather than an Afro-centric one related to the cults or ancestor worship of Africa.³ While the mainline denominations taught of a God who decreed Ham’s descendants to be slaves;

² “COLORED MAN IS TO SPEAK HERE,” *McKinney Daily Courier Gazette* (Texas) 23 June 1916.

³ E Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963). 55. Frazier believed blacks developed new ideas about God to fit their needs.

somehow, they knew the “true” God was different. Even though bereft of the full gospel about society, Chisum and Sojourner Truth and even Jack Johnson, Chisum’s childhood friend, found that “within their own beings” they had experience that bespoke of a spirit of freedom beyond bondage. Mystically they knew a transcendent God that had something good for them like other peoples. They had no name for their “true God” but spoke their thoughts in slave songs with the lyrics:

What is this, that makes me feel so good inside? What is this that makes me laugh when I feel like crying? Whatever it is, it won’t let me hold my peace. It makes me love my enemies and makes me love my friends. It won’t let me be ashamed that I’ve been born again.⁴

Even while black - they could be born again and washed white as snow – it in the supernatural though, the spirit realm of the true God.

As a student of theology and United States history, I grapple with distortions in the differences in white social gospel and the black social gospel as related to the American Black diaspora and their salvation history. Though seldom mentioned because it was the time of Civil Rights movement and equality, during desegregation many young blacks, struggled with blackness in a world where all black things were destroyed so that they might assimilate into white culture. William Elbert Burghardt (W.E.B.) DuBois called integration into existence. However, DuBois left for Africa leaving a generation to live out his vision. They faced a new Reconstruction much

⁴ This slave song has no origin. It was passed down through the black churches. The author picked it up in Virginia at First Union Baptist Church. Traveling through out the United States to black churches one finds that it is a part of the American Black Civil Religion song tradition.

like their ancestors one hundred years prior. Their world was torn apart. According to Ernst Breisach in *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (1983), New Left and Civil Rights historians “attacked the established order of black history” turning black heroes such as Booker T. Washington (BTW) “into dark figures” while underdogs such as W.E.B. DuBois became the heroes.⁵ The “true” black social gospel and American Black Civil Religion became the inspiration for the 1970s Reconstruction community to use in order to survive the angst that came from moving out of their black enclaves to the racism of desegregation where they were views as second-class citizens. These groups of young adults considered themselves martyrs like Martin Luther King Jr. They searched for heroes and heroines such as Brer Rabbit, Sojourner Truth, and men like Melvin Chisum in order to survive when their liberation was challenged. They needed not the fundamentalist jargon but a “seven day a week home training” that Chisum called for in his speech at Second Baptist Church, as they risked life, limb, and all for justice to go forward in the newly developing world.

Exploring this relationship deeply has shaped my academic work and Master’s Theses. At Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, this led to my writing “Sojourner Truth; A Faithful Witness” (1994). I wrote “A Defiant Breed” (1996) at the Divinity School at Duke University. At the University of Oklahoma, it was “Oklahoma’s First Black ‘Governor:’ Dr. Isaac William Young,” (2004) and *Justice Through Espionage* (2006). My master’s thesis at

⁵ See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). 363-365.

Oklahoma State University, "Driving Black America: Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr., African American King Maker (2014) helped me understand that Chisum's work was the same ideology of the black social gospel as Sojourner's. I discovered and followed the hypothesis of the black social gospel as linked to the "social gospel" but advanced to the understanding that there was an American Black Civil Religion over and above an American Civil Religion. Chisum's life fit the paradigm. Chisum changed from a neophyte to hero. Whether it was the death of Harriett Tubman (1914) or the realization that Booker T. Washington was dying (1915) (that consequently there would be no wizard to lead black people), something gave him impetus to save his people. However, in that time period he changed into a race warrior who took risks that no other man in the country was willing to take for indigent blacks and destitute white people.

Chisum's antics, the way he wrote and spoke of God "within him" and the black community's celebrations of John Brown's death, the Emancipation Proclamation, Nat Turner, and their accolades for Toussaint L'Overture, did not fit the mold and mores of the American social gospel ideal nor American Civil Religion. American social gospel is linked to Progressivism. It is associated with American Protestantism in the Northern States, but it was different from the religiosity of the ex-slaves in the southern states as well as those blacks like Chisum who moved North. The northern movement of the social gospel dealt with social problems related to Christian ethics found in the Dominionist Theology, which rose beside fundamentalism in the 1960s, not equivalent to the liberation theology among

blacks.⁶ This form of nationalism suggested that the one percent of rich people should rule the nation even after the Civil Rights Movement.

The Dominionist theology employed biblical textual guides that led the people to follow the “Beatitudes” versus a liberation theology. The theology incorporating “blessed be the meek” discouraged the meek from challenging the power structure. In the Progressive Era, poor blacks were tied to agriculture by gunmen surrounding them and used in labor by big business in the same ways as the past plantation owners used slaves. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the black social gospel was itself a response to traditional liberal and conservative mainline Christian Church dogma. Sometimes blacks had to shape-shift into the Son (a vessel for God’s spirit) during the night, play Brer Rabbit, and trick the trickster in order to move forward. Chisum became the modern shape-shifter in his time. Drawing the power from God he did what was necessary to save lives and souls. The article in the McKinney newspaper lifts Chisum as a “savior” of colored youths.⁷

The article recounts a national story about Chisum’s first known heroic achievement outside of the boxing ring. The *McKinney Dailey Courier Gazette* gave an overview of Chisum’s recent work saving young women’s virtue. It retold the story of Chisum’s expose of alleged immoral conditions at a colored school. Following his

⁶ For a history of Dominionist Theology see, Stephenie Hendricks, *Devine Destruction: Wise Use, Dominion Theology and the Making of American Environmental Policy* (Michigan: Melville House, 2005). Thomas Ice H. Wayne House, *Dominion Theology, Blessing or Curse?* (Massachusetts: Multnomah Press, 1988).

⁷ “COLORED MAN IS TO SPEAK HERE,” *McKinney Daily Courier Gazette* (Texas) 23 June 1916.

work in the central western state “the president, eight teachers, and a white physician were forced to sever their connections with the school. Subsequently, a libel suit was filed against Chisum and some five or six other actions. In but one case was the fearless editor convicted and the judge, after hearing the evidence was so astonished at the verdict, permitted Chisum to be released on his own recognizance.”⁸ What then made heroes who willing to give their lives for the common vile black human? It was the power inherent in the black social gospel. It is not that the social gospel was different between blacks and whites, between rich and poor; the difference was how they received the Revelation of God that was being held from their preaching and teaching.

The Anglo American-European social gospel has at least two strains. One was articulated by liberal clergymen like the radical Washington Gladden. John Garraty, in *The New Commonwealth 1877- 1890* (1968) wrote that Gladden rejected socialism but understood the industrial system was filled with benefits that could be spread among common people. Through a Christian point of view “applied Christianity,” society could be regenerated when Americans learned to share the wealth. He applied social sciences, economics and religion to form a social gospel of wealth and missions.⁹ The other “traditional European” strand resulted from a blend of sociology and Christianity. In *The Social Gospel in Black And White* (1991), Ralph Luker claimed that the first person to use the term ‘social gospel’ was an obscure pastor in Missouri, Harlan Paul Douglass, in his book, *Christian Reconstruction in the*

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Garraty, *The New Commonwealth 1877-1890* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1968), 321-322.

South (1909). Luke claimed Douglass' ideas mirrored strongly those of Gladden and the men of his period but his problem with the advocates of the social gospel in the Progressive Era was that they failed to do anything about racism. Douglass' ideas incorporated blacks in American-European social gospel. Luker's book incorporated blacks to American-European social gospel using a separate but equal classist framework.

Luker's theory was that the social gospel was an extension of home missions and the social reform movement.¹⁰ He is the first to write about whites taking their principles of social gospel to black enclaves. However, the contention of this chapter is that their Anglo-American-European based institutionalized ideas of "social gospel" missed the mark for men like Chisum and women like Sojourner Truth. The black gospel was linked more to the overshadowing power of the Holy Spirit, the part of God that took over the human spirit and then used it as God's own. An example would be the Pentecostal Revival on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. A holiness, ex-slave, black pastor William Seymour, began a revival meeting on April 9, 1906 that lasted until 1915. Even earlier, the Methodist churches in Illinois and Indiana, where Sojourner had preached, experienced supernatural activity. God spoke to the spirit "within her," not needing a preacher and bypassing social structures created by the dogma of mainline denominations.

These strands of the social gospel found and analyzed by Luker and Garraty were then superimposed upon the black community. This white dominant social

¹⁰ Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1991), 1-6.

gospel, sought to instill an Anglo-conservatism into Christianity and thereby replace the “spirit within” blacks found in the struggle for their own definitions of personhood, fulfillment, and equality. Anglo Americans wanted to maintain their hold on power through the dominant narrative. After years of purposefully misinterpreting Biblical texts to American black slaves and their free offspring to meet white needs, an ideology had to be created by blacks in order to fill the void that lies about God created in their lives.

Liberation theology through the social gospel dealt with the basic challenges of being black. Grassroots blacks particularly required a theology that refuted the vileness of blackness and inferiority -- their own skin, music, hair, and being - - that blacks had been taught to believe about themselves in church teaching that had become a part of mainline Christianity.¹¹ The gap between mainline Christianity and black spirituality remained. The black social gospel was more than what Luker perceived, just taking Douglass’ ideas to mainline pastors in large member inner-city churches. The doctrinal problems remained. They encouraged separate churches and separate dialogues as well as divisive laws like the Mann Act, the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, laws that were used against Chisum’s childhood friend, Jack Johnson, to stifle him from marrying a white woman. Under the Mann Act Johnson was jailed for carrying his fiancé from one state to the next.¹²

¹¹ Cecelia Brooks, "Oklahoma's First Black Governor": Dr. Isaac William Young," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* LXXXII, no. 1 Spring (2004). Erma Threatt explained that in the Methodist Church where Dr. Young worshipped no gospel was sung only hymns.

¹² Theresa Runstedtler, *Jack Johnson, Rebel Sojourner: Boxing in the Shadow of the Global Color Line* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). 134, 135, 160.

The Anglo social gospel expressed by Luker and Gladden only made blacks worthy of help but not people worthy of equality. Thus, if God loved even them, blacks needed, discovered, and adhered to a “black social gospel” that spoke beyond the mainline teachings. Since their slave past taught they were little more than animals, blacks had lacked a Jesus who could save them and transform them into being truly human. Slaves were taught that Jesus was a mighty warrior much like an overseer. They should obey him. That image did not work for them. Slaves, their children, and freemen who would not completely accept what Anglos taught, went inside of their beings – searching and finding “a knowledge within” them. There they found the Holy Spirit as Sojourner Truth did in her “call.” Witness to faith within took on the same form that it had for centuries – liberation from following the mores of the dominant culture.

Creating a niche in recent scholarship, Dr. Gary Dorrien, of Union Theological Seminary in New York, contributed another strand in recent scholarship by linking the black social gospel to the Civil Rights movement. According to Dorrien’s *The New Abolition* (2015), prior to his work, literature on the black social gospel existed, but no books were written.¹³ Ralph Luker’s, *Social Gospel in Black and White* (1991) title seems in contention with Dorrien but it is not. Luker’s thesis communicated the same old social gospel that used European motifs.¹⁴ Dorrien found that intricately

¹³ Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Dubois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), ix.

¹⁴ Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black And White*, Luker’s book follows the historiography of the gospel instead of veering towards a black social gospel with black heroes, black theology, and black icons. His response is the historiography in the American white Protestant venue of Charles Hopkins’ *The Rise of the Social*

woven into the black social gospel was a political justice movement.¹⁵ It fit Bellah's criteria. In the multi-dimensional society created by racial separation, blacks had their own heroes, wars, holidays, folklore, and literature that lifted up their struggles against oppression.¹⁶

Dorrien developed his idea of the black social gospel emphasis which he found in the roots of W.E.B. Du Bois' justice reform movement. Dorrien, like August Meier who wrote *Negro Thought in America* (1963), found a mystic side inside of W.E.B. Du Bois' life experience. Meier called DuBois a scholar, a prophet, and a mystic.¹⁷ The politics of reform linked Du Bois to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s part in the civil rights movement. Dorrien concluded, "The Black Social Gospel emerged from the trauma of Reconstruction to ask what a 'new abolition' would require in American society. It became an important tradition of religious thought and resistance, helping to create an alternative public sphere of excluded voices and providing the intellectual underpinnings of the civil rights movement."¹⁸ While Dorrien insisted that the Reconstruction narrative shows enlightenment, the

Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915, (1940); Frederick Johnson's, *The Social Gospel Re-Examined* (1940); Henry May's, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (1949); and Paul Allen Carter's *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel, Social and Political Liberalism in American Protestant Churches, 1920-1940* (1954.)

¹⁵ See Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 168. See Gary Smith, "Faith and the American Presidency," in *Christianity Today* 99, online at ChristianityToday.org.

¹⁶ Bellah, *Civil Religion in America*, 1.

¹⁷ August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1995: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963). 206.

¹⁸ Dorrien., *The New Abolition*, 297; Kim Butterweck, "Gary Dorrien Wins Religion Award for Examination of the Black Social Gospel," in *News Religion*, 1 December 2016, at Grawemeyer.org

contention of this chapter is that the new abolition movement was not new but a continuing tradition of the American Black Civil Religion tied to black worship of heroes as far back as the rise of Toussaint L'Overture in his successful but brutal slave revolt in Haiti. Both historians and Dorrien as a theologian overlook the work of border characters in the movement such as Sojourner Truth and Melvin Chisum.

By his mid-twenties Chisum, like others, functioned in this mode of the black social gospel. He was not a "come to Jesus missionary" of the main-line Anglo denominations. Chisum did build homes in New York, but he was also a crusader of the black social gospel justice ideal that followed the historically dominant American black history narrative of an "on the ground" common man ministry. Carter G. Woodson's books on black history, *The History of the Negro Church* (1921) and *The Negro in Our History* (1922), along with Horace Talbert's *The Sons of Allen* (1906), and Clement Richardson's *National Cyclopaedia of the Colored Race* (1919), among other books written and edited by black scholars of the early twentieth century, were the ones that set forth the black social history paradigm. The men they honored fought racism on the level of the spiritual warfare and were recognized by C. Vann Woodward in his book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, not by name but by historical content.¹⁹ For Woodward, Jim Crow was a demon of division. Black people needed a spiritual weapon to fight this demon. This had to be present in their heroes. They held on to mysticism from their past, mixtures of Anglo, Indian, Afro myth and legend symbiotically linked to Methodist Christianity. This was not

¹⁹ C. Van Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

added to the “white Jesus” but it arose as “a witness within” themselves. The liberating Spirit in Jesus, God’s own Holy Spirit, came alive within them. What was on the outside did not matter. In their witness to a transcendent deity they found a God beyond mainline Protestant teaching.

Scholars like Garraty, Luker, and Dorrien, erred in not understanding that blacks did not take in all they were taught. They learned “to eat mutton and say nutton.”²⁰ They had been lied to so much, that blacks, especially those that followed the Methodist church, saw the hypocrisy of the church, when he learned to read the Bible as a child (like Jack Johnson chapter 3). However, they took most information to heart in order to deal with it at a later time. Methodist schools expelled Jack Johnson for saying that “their” God was not real. Later in his career he felt that the mainline church was “full of hypocrisy in its most deplorable forms.”²¹ Johnson discovered the revelation of God and tested it in his personal life. Though Chisum believed in God, his son and daughter emphasized that he did as he preached. He did not participate every Sunday in organized religion.

How did boys even while being indoctrinated by Methodist pastors understand the historical critical method of interpreting scriptures? In many respects, they – as Sojourner – had a critical understanding of the scriptures to which the educated elite white males of their time adhered – but even white liberal pastors taught a controlling theology. The boys and Sojourner (who was illiterate)

²⁰ This was phrase we learned in the Southern American black community about keeping our mouths shut to deal with the issue later when around white people.

²¹ Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson: In the Ring and Out* (Chicago: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927), 234.

looked at the Biblical text critically to allow for errors on the part of its human writers. They believed the Bible was the “Word of God.” However, its writers had incorporated part of their history into the work, just as slave owners, male pastors and Anglo women, had assimilated the Bible to fit their needs. The black mainline witness came after years of indoctrination. Their social witness came from a witness deep inside themselves. It was like being born with a veil, or the seventh child, of the seventh child of the seventh child. The history of the knowledge of one’s gift was passed down by word of mouth and finally made explicit in Sojourner’s autobiography. It was a Christian mystic witness. The story of Sojourner Truth revealed the genesis of the black social gospel and possibly the gospel of the dispossessed.

These American Black Civil Religious ideals, set the stage to understand Melvin Chisum in a framework for the rest of the dissertation. Linking his life to Sojourner, and adding the liberation theology of Richard Neibuhr, clarifies who and what Chisum was to a generation of leaders who needed an espionage agent with skills to work between black and white worlds, in the physical and spiritual realms. The development within the black world of a American Black Civil Religion in juxtaposition to a general American Civil Religion, provides an archetype to understand the reason blacks like Chisum were compared to Sojourner Truth, Toussaint L ‘Overture, who were outlaws to Anglo American Civil Religion but heroes to American blacks. Placing Chisum back into history not as an antagonist but as a black protagonist of the first two decades of the twentieth century helps add to works that other historians have started. In chapter 4 this new presentation of

Chisum broadens the vision of what historian Shawn Alexander described in his book *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (2012).²² Alexander however could not completely finish his premise. He needed the character of Chisum as the glue, spy, or secret tool carrying out the work of the “Army of Lions.” This is seen in the mission that Chisum undertook for BTW of spying on the Oklahoma government because of the plight of Oklahoma’s black Indian freedmen. The resulting risks he took at the southern school led Chisum to arrive at his own beliefs and transformed him into a new being. This risk taking was because his “spirit within” led him as a faithful witness to the God within to take on actions over and above what was accepted as the norm. This same type of actions may have had him murdered in the World War II period (chapter 8).

The Christology of Isabella’s Journey to become Sojourner Truth

Faithful witness takes on the same form that it has for centuries – liberation from the world to a closer relationship to God. This new relationship helps one say yes to one’s authentic calling, whether preacher, teacher, barber, clerk, doctor, spy, provocateur, government agent or any other calling in life. Renewed relationship with God with this “otherliness” leads to a personal ministry. The mission usually climaxes in becoming a liberator for others. It takes the form of sacrifice, humility, vulnerability and risk. The closer relationship with the Creator brings a pride in

²² Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), xi-xvii.

being God's adopted heir. The vileness of skin color could now be put aside. Heirs to the acceptance of societal norms were no longer central to the witness of the Christian. The new radical realm created through the atonement between humankind and God, was accepted as central to the human lifestyle. This realm was where one seeks the authentic self –not the organized church but the self within or without the church – is where faithful witness becomes the action of risking all, including life and liberty, to bring in God's kingdom.

This power of the cross has been the same in the past and into eternity. It has transformed the dispossessed since the beginning of time. As an American black man, it transformed Melvin Chisum Sr. to respond to life goals that included fighting demons of racism, sexism, and classism in his country. An understanding of this faithful witness through liberation can be comprehended through incorporating the Christology in the book *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1875) with Richard Niebuhr's idea of revelation in his book *The Meaning of Revelation* (1941).²³ God's power to liberate beyond historical bondage is shown in the story of Isabella or "Sojourner Truth," an African American slave. This narrative interprets how the Spirit of God eternally dwells in the church (not a building but the body of believers), offering each person a chance to be a vessel of faithful witness, when and if the person says yes with his transformed life. Niebuhr's disclosure of revelation helps in the

²³ The book was written down by Olive Gilbert but dictated by Sojourner Truth. Olive Gilbert, *Sojourner Truth, Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Draws from Her "Book of Life"* (Boston: Published for the author, 1875); Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1941).

understanding of faithful witness in the past, including Sojourner's life. It gives an understanding of the form faithful witness took in the world during the Progressive Era, Civil Rights Era and into modernity.

Neibuhr's theory of revelation suggests a Christological reading of the history of Sojourner Truth's experience. This stands in contrast to recent studies by Afrocentricist historians of nineteenth century American black religious narratives like that of Sojourner Truth. These writers place the experience of life as an African over and against the person's Christology. Such writers as Molefi Asante and Patricia Collins claim that women like Sojourner cannot find their true self-hood unless they understand and absorb their African heritage.²⁴ These writers interpret the Christian experience of people of African ancestry through the experience of African traditional religions. This insistence overlooks the sharp contrast between Christianity and African traditional religions. The narrative of Sojourner is clearly one of Christocentric ideas contextualizing in the American black experience. Sojourner centered her life story on her experiences of the revelation of God through realizing what the historical Jesus meant to her and all people. The historical Jesus can be a theological term limited to the human Jesus; a liberal theological term used to limit the power of Jesus to be a "great teacher" linked to the "Beatitudes." Here Jesus is Christos. He is the revelation, "the Christ."²⁵ Niebuhr used

²⁴ Mole Asante, *Facing South to Africa: Toward an Afrocentric Critical Orientation* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014). 1-2. Molefi Asante, "The Role of an Afrocentric Ideology" (paper presented at the Commitment to Civil Society, Dakar, Senegal, 2009); Patricia Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989). 745-747.

²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Nature and the Destiny of Man I: A Christian Interpretation*

terms developed by theologian Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* (1936). God the father is the Revealer.²⁶ Jesus the Son is what God revealed of God's self. The Holy Spirit works through revealedness, which enables an individual to know the Christos or the Christ, and inputs Christ's blueprint in the individual of how to do God's work on earth.

Neibuhr's theology of revelation is rooted in the disclosure of revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Revelation occurs in history by the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. One comes to know Christianity in this way through Christ as known in the scripture. The grace of God gives faith through the Spirit. The Spirit gives faith in Christ immediate personal reality. The revelation in Christ becomes the state of revealedness through the work of the Spirit. After Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, God's own Holy Spirit breaks barriers between the human and God bringing faith, as knowledge of who Jesus is, to those who seek God. God's power can be in humans like the Christ. Faith then is faith in Christ and Christ points humanity to God. Faith is participation in the divine life and creates a noetic possibility that is the inner wisdom or ability to know God. Through Christ the human can actually mystically come to know God through a sense of revelation. Thus, God touches one's moral, intellectual, and spiritual life through this revelation. Humans are clothed in Christ, given the same chance to live as he did in the world, as well as given power to create through Christ. Therefore, revelation is alive and present in human life. Neibuhr's conception of revelation in Christ counters the

Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941). 144-147.

²⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1 (London: T&T Clark, 1936-1977). 16.

claims of the centrality of African religious experience made by Asante and Collins. To center Sojourner's life Christologically thus shows the miracle the revelation of the black social gospel as God's own work within the slave culture in the American past. Niebuhr's analysis of revelation shows how revelation can be past, present, and future. Sojourner was liberated by revelation into salvation, freedom, and justice. She was liberated to bring glory to God (not herself) in this world even as a black, a woman, and as a slave. Such a Christological reading of Sojourner's autobiography is more accurate or authentic to her experience than is suggested by giving centrality to African traditional religion.

This Christological version allows for revelatory participation in the divine life. The power of the word of God permeates the world that God has liberated and redeemed through Jesus Christ. That world overshadows the world built by human hands. It is essentially God's grace that reached Sojourner. Initially Sojourner sought God but backed away because the God she found was not her own. Finally, she decided to give herself to God, if God would have her. Throughout her life Sojourner had heard the scriptures read and explained to her. But she never felt they were her history; to use Niebuhr's phrase they were "an external history." Somehow, she realized others' interpretations of the Bible (or Logos-the Word) were not adequate. She chose to interpret the essential meaning of scripture from the witness or noetic reality "within her" rather than listen to what ministers and teachers taught. In regard to interpretation of the Scripture, she:

... wished to hear the [scriptures] without comment; but if she employed adult persons to read them to her, and she asked them to read a passage over

again, they invariably commenced to explain, by giving her their version of it; and in this way, they tried her feelings exceedingly. In consequence of this, she ceased to ask adult persons to read the Bible to her, and she substituted children in their stead.... She wished to compare the teaching of the Bible with the witness within her, and she came to the conclusion, that the spirit of truth spoke in those records, but the recorders of those truths had intermingled with them ideas of supposition of their own.²⁷

How did this illiterate woman understand the historical critical method of thinking about scripture? In many respects Sojourner had the critical understanding of the scriptures to which mainly the educated elite white males of her time adhered. She looked at the Bible critically to allow for contextualization on the part of its writers who were “inspired by God.” She believed the Bible was the “Word of God,” but its writers had co-opted part of their history into the work, just as slave owners, male pastors and Anglo women had incorporated the Bible to fit their needs.

Niebuhr’s definition of the revelation leads to an understanding of the action of God with the marginalized. The revelation of God in Christ Jesus is God’s gift of grace for humankind. For Sojourner, the God of the dominant culture is an abstract and remote God. He does not enter her experience. In contrast there is a historical God that does. She finds out they are one and the same. “He is always the God of history, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or the Father of Jesus Christ and not only the

²⁷ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* 108-109.

God of abstract thought.”²⁸ It remains true that Christian faith cannot escape from partnership with history.

Born in the United States of America as a child of slave parents, Sojourner knew God only as the one thing to look for when she was lost and in pain. Her mother had said to look in the sky if you are ever separated and God will lead you. This she also related, “I can member when I was a little bigger than this ere, pointing to her grandson, how my old mammy would sit out o’doors in the evenin and look up at the stars and groan. She’d groan, groan, groan.”²⁹ God was transcendent and not defined. In her reading and understanding apart from the interpretation by adults, she gave herself to God as innocently as the children that read to her. God’s word became the revelation and dwelled within her.

Undergirding Niebuhr’s work, *The Meaning of Revelation*, is a strong belief in the power of sin. Sin vitiated creation. Creation was good but through the fall thoroughly dismantled by sin. Only God could recreate, rectify the situation, and bring justification. That new creation is in Jesus Christ. Only in Jesus Christ, the second Adam, is the restoration of the ‘image of God’ in creation. Before this restoration humanity was not transforming but building on the past. Humans were growing like weeds, running wild in sin because the fall of Adam dismantled creation; sin was an intrinsic part of created people. Religion was fundamentally

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 31.

²⁹ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* 154. Until she met this God Sojourner participated in several para Christian religious activities.

false because it built on creation that was dismantled by sin. Through God's working the revelation, the human-divine connection was remade to repair the initial creation. In Christ was the new or restored, 'Image of God.' Jesus Christ takes humans back to creation as God intended it to be. In Jesus Christ one's very being is transformed. Humans who did not know God now know God! Only in Jesus Christ can inner redemption take place. Only in Christ can wholeness take place. For humankind, God's presence is definitely experienced in Jesus as the name Emmanuel. Jesus explains the character of God in the historical actions of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Through scripture God's gracious love is revealed to humankind. God is grace. To say God is grace is to say that what is revealed in Jesus Christ is the truth of God's own self. Seeing the presence in Jesus Christ prepares one to discover the awareness in every activity of God. In Sojourner's experience one sees that the presence in Jesus in her life becomes a guide for His presence with others. She learns to love and forgive.

Sojourner Truth's story displays the intrinsic sinfulness of a country that allowed humans to be exploited as animals instead of sisters and brothers created equally by God. Women of African descent in America were at the bottom of the social ladder. Twentieth century women such as Mary Mc Leod Bethune deciphered the stigma within black womanhood. "She was not a person, in the opinion of many, but a thing – a thing whose personality had no claim to the respect of mankind. She was a household drudge, a means from getting distasteful work done; she was an animated agricultural implement to augment the service of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting the cotton crop. She was an automatic incubator, a

producer of human livestock, beneath whose heart and mind more potential laborers could be bred and nurtured and brought to the light of toilsome day.”³⁰

A black woman was the epitome of sin in culture. Sojourner’s sin was intrinsic to her living when colonial, Reconstruction and Progressive culture saw black women as vile, degenerate, sordid, and base. Her sin was intrinsic to her being. Throughout her childhood she was reminded of the offensiveness of being a black woman in a white man’s world. This particularity is seen in her experience of meeting Jesus. She looked at her color to see if it had changed. It had not. So, she reasoned that color was not something that would separate her from God.

Later in her work Sojourner asks the question in regards to the sin of slavery and religion in the United States. “And what is that religion that sanctions even by its silence all that is embraced in the ‘peculiar institution’? If there can be anything more diametrically opposed to the religion of Jesus, than the working of this soul-killing system, which is as truly sanctioned by the religion of America as are her ministers and churches, we wish to be shown where it can be found.”³¹ Her conversion bears some examination. What does Sojourner say about Jesus? How did she get to know it? What Sojourner knew about Jesus was her revelatory interpretation of what the Bible says in regards to her experience in the United States as an oppressed and exploited African American woman. This was

³⁰ Mary McLeod Bethune, *A Century of Progress of Negro Women*, ed. Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972), 578.

³¹ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* 154.

interpreted by the 'spirit of truth' she believed lived within her. After the abolition of slavery in New York, Sojourner Truth told about her first intimate meeting with God through Jesus.

An' I turned right round an' come into the house, an' set down in my room; for 't was God all around me. I could feel it burnin', burnin', burnin' all around me, an' goin' through me; an' I saw I was so wicked, it seemed as ef it would burn me up. An' I said, 'O somebody, somebody, stand between God an' me! for it burns me!' Then, honey, when I said so, I felt as it were something' like an amberill [umbrella] that came between me an' the light, an' I felt it was somebody-- somebody that stood between me an' God; an' it felt cool, like a shade; an' says I, 'Who's this that stands between me an' God? Is it old Cato?' He was a pious old preacher; but then I seemed to see Cato in the light, an' he was all polluted an' vile, like me; an' I said, 'Is it old Sally?' an' then I saw her, an' she seemed jes' so. An' then says I, 'Who is this?' An' then, honey, for awhile it was like the sun shinin' in a pail o' water, when it moves up and down; for I begun to feel t'was somebody that loved me; an' I tried to know him. An' I said, 'I know you! I know you! I know you!' An' then I said, 'I don't know you! I don't know you! I don't know you!' An' when I said, 'I know you, I know you' the light came; an' when I said, 'I do n't know you, I do n't know you,' it went jes' like the sun in a pail o' water. An' finally somethin' spoke out in me an' said, 'This is Jesus!' An' I spoke out with all my might, an' says I, 'This is Jesus! Glory be to God!' An' then the whole world grew bright, an' the trees they waved an' waved in glory, an' every little bit o' stone on the ground shone like glass; and I shouted an' said, 'Praise, praise, praise to the Lord!' An' I begun to feel sech a love in my soul as I never felt before--love to all creatures. An' then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an' I said, 'Dar's de white folks that have abused you, an' beat you, an' abused your people--think o' them!' But then there came another rush of love through my soul, an' I cried out loud--'Lord, Lord, I can love even de white folks!'

"Honey, I jes' walked round an' round in a dream. Jesus loved me! I knowed it--I felt it. Jesus was my Jesus. Jesus would love me always. I did n't dare tell nobody; 't was a great secret. Everything had been got away from me that I ever had; an' I thought that ef I let white folks know about this, maybe they 'd get Him away--so I said, 'I'll keep this close. I wont let any one know.'"

"But, Sojourner, had you never been told about Jesus Christ?"

"No, honey. I had n't heerd no preachin'--been to no meetin.' Nobody had n't told me. I'd kind o' heerd of Jesus, but thought he was like Gineral Lafayette, or some o' them.³²

Sojourner Truth says that Jesus is her mediator between her and a wrathful God. She defines what separates her from God as 'vileness'. Vileness means degeneracy, sordidness, or baseness. Her sin is intrinsic to her being. With this type of degradation of the Spirit, the woman is a prime candidate for spiritual wholeness that comes through God who vindicates the oppressed. Only God can accomplish this through Jesus Christ. She knows she has been cleansed because of God's spiritual acknowledgment to her. She needs cleansing and someone or something to bring her within God's reach. Jesus, the Jesus of the 'woman at the well', the Jesus whose garment bought healing to the filthy bleeding woman would do this for her. Jesus who has passed the realm of humanity, would accomplish this for her through resurrection power.

She refers to elements of her own experience to explain the entry of Jesus into her life. There has been no one to stand between her and the troubles of this world. There was no one to mediate her need to God until this spiritual meeting with Jesus. She was free from slavery and free from other pains in a world that had not changed. Jesus was like an umbrella allowing coolness in a day of burning heat. He cooled life for her between a new realm of understanding and a society of fire. Jesus is a mediator between her and God, a wrathful adulterated bridegroom; she

³² Bethune, *A Century of Progress of Negro Women*, 157-159.

has been separated from God not on spiritual level. Like in the theology of Luther - God is a roaring fire that may burn one - unless there is Jesus to keep you from the flames. No longer did she see Jesus as a Lafayette or a soldier but someone who loved her enough to stand in the fire and bring her through, like God had done for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

For Sojourner knowing that freedom in Jesus was like a pail of water at the end of working all day in a hot field - oh so good and cool is water, changing the temperature of the body, cooling a thirsty throat for one who has no choice but to work in slavery because one cannot quench one's thirst until permission is granted - this Jesus is living water, water that makes one thirst no more and empowers one to go onward to life's callings. The light of Jesus in her life shone through the darkness that encompassed the life of the slave woman. She was free and was vindicated like Jesus had been vindicated over all those who had persecuted him. Some historians say this paragraph is one of liberation not only from slavery but from American history; and the history of Sojourner and her mission prove it is liberation from worldliness.

Sojourner's spirit was vindicated through Christ and in union with God through the Spirit of God. She is justified through the grace of God that had somehow eluded her until she was directly spiritually transformed. The misery of being human livestock, the agony of not being able to offer her children a refuge, and the vileness of being a black woman were exonerated. Sojourner became a new creation. God loved her! The curse of being a second Eve was lifted! She was

liberated. In her memoirs, Harriet Beecher Stowe describes Sojourner as acting “with a superior way about her.”³³ Stowe had met and assessed many American Black women. From this information we may discern that God transformed Sojourner. She is “superior” to Stowe. God was in her. Even though she walked with a cane, she felt equal to others because Sojourner possibly no longer walked with her head down as black women had done. At a height of six feet tall and with self knowledge of redemption, she may have had superior carriage. God is in her. She cannot think of herself as ‘vile’ and thus presented a superior being to the writer of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.³⁴

The indwelling of God in her was an act of grace. Sojourner’s heart began the noetic exegesis, meaning to know deeper truths uncovered by scripture, in her process of reasoning.³⁵ At first, she wanted to keep the love and knowledge to herself out of fear, “But one night there was a Methodist meetin' somewhere in our parts, an' I went; an' they got up an' begun for to tell der 'speriences: an' de fust one begun to speak. I started, 'cause he told about Jesus. 'Why,' says I to myself, 'dat man 's found him, too!' An' another got up an' spoke, an' I said, 'He's found him, too!' An'

³³ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* 157.

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 59. Collins suggests the imagery could be used by Stowe in a manner to control the reader’s ideas of Truth.

³⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 301-303. Sojourner’s German mysticism is linked with her noetic exegesis of the Bible. See Paul Tillich, *Paul Tillich Morality and Beyond* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 72-76.

finally I said, 'Why, they all know him!' I was so happy!³⁶ She found a community who experienced the same gift from God. Revelation came as she realized she did not think of God by herself but God thought of it first. God was just waiting for her to ask for revelation. "Revelation means that in our common history the fate which lowers over us as persons in our communities reveals itself to be a person in a community with us."³⁷

Niebuhr explains in relation to an exclamation such as these from Sojourner Truth that faith "cannot be expressed in impersonal ways of creeds or other propositions but only in responsive acts of a personal character. We acknowledge revelation personally and specifically," not like her mother who said there is a God, but only through a confession coming from the human heart saying that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob "is" and "'Thou art my God.'"³⁸ The historical scripture given by God, read in a particular community, brings revelation. This is considered an act of God in grace. A simple explanation is that to participate in the community of the Revealedness the history of God in the Biblical narrative cannot be a "my story" or belong to only one people, e.g., of Africa, Asia, or Europe.³⁹ Those involved must accept and acknowledge the Bible as the Christian story. The dominant society does not acculturate everyone to become like them. Nor are the marginalized allowed to ostracize the dominant society. Sojourner can even love "de white folks." The African becomes the African Christian. The Asian becomes Asian Christian. The

³⁶ Ibid., 157.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 112.

³⁸ Ibid., 81.

³⁹ Ibid., xxiii.

American Black becomes an American Black Christian. The first way of interpretation leads to the ethnic identity becoming a lower case “g” for God. The second leads to a community with a center including God’s given history for God’s people. This is an act of grace that is climaxed in the resurrection of Christ through newness in being. The Scripture Galatians 3:28 is appropriate here: “(In God’s grace) There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Jesus is God’s grace. The history of those in the church is the story of “our fathers,” “our mothers,” “our Lord,” and the actions of “our God.” This same acceptance is necessary for faithful witness today.

Sojourner demonstrated this realization in her ministry. She reasoned that people are alike. In a meeting for women’s rights she established a precedent for equality:

“Well, chilern, whar dar is so much racket dar must be something out o’ kilter. I tink dat ‘twixt de niggers of de Souf and de women at de Norf all a talkin’ ‘bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what’s all dis here talkin’ ‘bout? Dat man ober dar say dat women needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place every whar. Nobody eber help me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gives me any best place [and raising herself to her full height and her voice to a pitch like rolling thunder, she asked], and ar’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! [And she bared her right arm to the shoulder, showing her tremendous muscular power.] I have plowed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me--and ar’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well--and ar’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard--and ar’n’t I a woman? Den dey talks ‘bout dis ting in de head--what dis dey call it?’ ‘Intellect,’ whispered some one near. ‘Dat’s it honey. What’s dat got to do with women’s rights or niggers’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint

and yourn holds a quart, would n't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?'

And she pointed her significant finger and sent a keen glance at the minister who had made the argument. The cheering was long and loud.

"'Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can't have as much rights as man, cause Christ want a woman. Whar did your Christ come from?' Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eye of fire. Raising her voice still louder, she repeated, 'Whar did your Christ come from? From God and a woman. Man had nothing to do with him.' Oh! what a rebuke she gave the little man.⁴⁰

A bridge connects the history of humanity. This revelation is what blacks thought the Republican Party understood in their stand to free slaves and when they made Abraham Lincoln part of their Black Social Gospel narrative and placed him and the Republican Party under the umbrella of the Black American Civil Religion.

However, this is not the end of the movement of revelation or the Revealedness of God's Spirit. To stay in the community "the heart must reason."⁴¹ Niebuhr describes the revelation like reading a difficult book and seeking to follow a complicated argument. Sometimes one has to go forward and backward to attain understanding of the whole. "The special occasion to which we appeal in the Christian church is called Jesus Christ, in whom we see the righteousness of God, his power and wisdom. But from the special occasion we also derive the concepts that make possible the elucidation of all the events in our history." Niebuhr wrote, "Revelation means this intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

Revelation means the point at which we can begin to think and act as members of an intelligible and intelligent world of persons."⁴²

Sojourner's statement also incorporates Niebuhr's idea of the Holy Spirit as the Revealedness. In his chapter in *The Meaning of Revelation*, 'The Story of Our Life', Niebuhr sets up a place of interception. He portrays an instance when the revelatory event can be received. The Holy Spirit works in community to illuminate those gathered in the divine self that they have the history of the scripture in common. This is also an act of God in grace. Faith to believe is also a gift of God. They must participate in a history together. How do they know each other in the history? That history is known by an inner knowledge given by God in grace. The confession of this witness is admittedly esoteric to the Christian community. The history of the inner life can only be confessed by selves who speak of what happens to them in the community of the other selves.⁴³

Niebuhr develops the relationship between wrong imagination and right reasons of the heart. He understands that by Revelation in our history we mean that special occasion which provides us with an image by means of which all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible. Revelation, understood in this way, interprets the past, the present and the future because the Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, destroying the wrong imaginations of the heart. Every person is no more than an "immigrant into the empire of God." Niebuhr

⁴² Ibid., 69.

⁴³ Ibid., 54, 57.

believes one must learn to remember the history of that empire including their own personal tradition but not allowing that to override the Christian tradition.

This sets a precedent for a pluralist society within the Christian society. As immigrants, people come in all conditions such as womanists, feminists, Afro-centricists, Hispanics, Africans, Asians, -- one could go on to trace all the factions in the Christian church. Neibuhr places Jesus Christ as the center as the revelation that everyone knows. People should work out their identity as a church from this Christological center. Chaos may incur from any other position that does not have the potential of God for recreation of the created. Too much emphasis on experience leads to a natural theology of which he was not a proponent. Humans do not have the capacity to think of transcendent things on their own. Theologies of liberation should not be centered in experience since knowledge of God is not derived from human activities but in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit, who reveals the work of God to the world, illuminates a community to discern that they have the history of scripture in common. Sojourner claimed that she knew to do this because of the "spirit of truth within her."⁴⁴ Without the intervention of interpreters Sojourner realized their Christian history is her history. But Anglos in community do not. Women's suffrage would not include the idea of the vote for women of American Black ancestry. It would be many years before the inception of equality was received by the larger community which surrounded Sojourner. Sin was still present. Perhaps that was why her journey incorporated so much traveling. She became the conduit of revelation by gathering

⁴⁴ She develops her spiritual name "Truth," from this idea.

community as she went on her interracial journeys. Had it not been for the “sojourners” of the nineteenth century would a community have voted in the 1860s for equal rights in the fourteenth amendment to be added to the Constitution? Revelation through Christ is in the past, present, future and into eternity. God not only works in community but also develops community.

In this revealedness Sojourner knew the revelation of God. She received transformational power through the Word of God. This history is known by an inner knowledge given by God. This continues God’s acts in grace including the faith to believe. By participating in the history of the Bible, together with people all her life who had claimed Christianity but had not but not participated fully in what it meant, communicated itself beyond the color and gender line for Sojourner. This is no small issue considering that Sojourner was a woman of American black ancestry enslaved in America. Revelation of freedom came as she was also living in a time that women, especially black women did not have equal rights with men. Then she became a “sojourner.”

After a struggle to be a Christian in her historical situation despite Anglo dogma, Sojourner made a decision and responded by giving her life not only for her people but for all people. She had never been farther east than her city. Nor did she any friends who might help her. But she felt called by the Spirit to leave and travel east to lecture. After putting a few articles of clothing in a pillow case about an hour before she left, she informed Mrs. Whiting, the woman of the house where she was working, that her name was no longer Isabella, but Sojourner; and that she “was

going east!”⁴⁵ Her mission was not merely to travel east but lecture as she did so, testifying about the hope that was in her – exhorting the people to embrace Jesus and refrain from sin, the nature and origin of which she explained to them with her own “most curious views.”⁴⁶

This revelation is open to modernity. To be in faithful witness for God, each Christian must not be content at any juncture in a journey of faith. People must be willing to risk everything to follow the mission of the church of the living God. There were certainly differences in the black social gospel tradition from the mainline traditions. Whereas Anglo Americans during the period focused on the Jesus or “Christos” as liberator and moved this dogma into Progressive Era reform, American blacks focused on the mystical powers of the “Pneuma” or the Holy Spirit of the Trinity. Harlan’s reference to BTW as “black Jesus” in *The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington* and reference to the immorality of having Chisum as a spy, contradicts the paradigm of American Black Social Gospel. The meta language of the movement answers the question which Harlan did not understand when he wrote:

If it ever seemed to Washington incongruous for himself, the conventional and conservative black leader, the Baptist layman, the public purveyor of conventional morality, to be in league with this plump little rogue in a bullet-proof vest who made his living by invading the privacy of others, he never committed such an attitude to writing. His resort to his humble servant Chisum is a measure of a certain moral insensitivity in Washington that one does not find in the private lives of his opponents such as DuBois or even Trotter. Those Harvard graduates started near the top. Washington, having

⁴⁵ Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Bondswoman of Olden Time, Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the Early Part of the Present Century, with a History of the Labors and Correspondence, Drawn from Her "Book of Life,"* 100.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

started in slavery and poverty, would gag at almost nothing that promised dominance.⁴⁷

Blacks were real spooks like the witches and shape shifters from the stories of Brer Rabbit but got their power from God in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit (see chapter 4). Most of the work happened in the dark, behind bars as with Paul when the Angel visited him in jail and set him loose in the biblical narrative without the knowledge of the larger world. Black Christian mysticism developed over years of slavery in the stories of animals, Zulu words of power and wisdom like those used by Merritt Trammell in Limestone, Texas, and included African and American Indian religious traditions (see chapter 4). However, the black social gospel movement was fluid. Several divisions were manifest in the political religious movement. While the movement of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) would wind up on Azusa Street in California in 1906, Chisum's American black baptism in the social gospel led to justice through espionage. Christian mystics such as Harriett Tubman and other less known "underground railroad" leaders were alive during this period. Under the leadership of Bishop William Derrick, Bishop Alexander Walters, Bishop Reverdy Ransom, and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, aggressive religious movements broke out among young Methodists on white and black college campuses.⁴⁸

Researching the black narrative of their own heroes, the American Black Civil Religion template included the work of slave uprisings, Brer Rabbit stories teaching

⁴⁷ Harlan, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, 92; Louis Harlan, "The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (August 1971).

⁴⁸ Methodist Episcopal Church, *Northwestern Christian Advocate* 52 (23 March 1904).

about survival, men of affairs elevating their race, and people carrying out acts of espionage. Frederick Douglass and AME Bishops such as William Derrick and Alexander Walters pressured the government for rights within committee rooms. American blacks and their accomplices such as John Brown took violent action to gain justice and used any means necessary. Their narratives elevated rebellious blacks such as Toussaint L'Overture, Cow Tom (Interpreter and first black Creek Indian Chief), Merritt Trammell (chapter 3), Isabella Baumfree (Sojourner Truth), Uncle Tom, Bishop William Derrick, and Harriett Tubman, as well as whites such as John Brown.⁴⁹ These blacks lived as people called to be missionary tricksters who saved people's physical lives from the enslaver Jim Crow. Sometimes they outmaneuvered white supremacist policies through underground railroads, court hearings, mutiny, and other rebellious acts. Sometimes, like Uncle Tom, they played whatever part was necessary to gain an outcome better than their existing condition. Chisum fit into this niche of people who facilitated change, just as W.E.B. DuBois and Kelly Morgan had in the world of the talented tenth or highly educated black world. They all played a game with whites and even with each other. Unlike Harlan's assessment that BTW was the exception – BTW was actually the norm.

Black leaders knew this was a game. Chisum played it with BTW and outsiders. For instance, while under cover and spying for BTW among the Niagaraites on June 1, 1907, Melvin Chisum wrote to BTW to update him on his

⁴⁹ Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1921); *The Negro in Our History* (Washington D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1932); Horace Talbert, *The Sons of Allen* (Xenia Ohio: The Aldine Press, 1906); Clement Richardson, *The National Cyclopaedia of the Colored Race* (Montgomery, Alabama: National Publishing Company, Inc., 1919).

mission. He explained that African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Alexander Walters of the Niagara movement sympathized and applauded BTW's adaptation of this accommodation (accepting second class citizenship while focusing on economic betterment). Walters had no real argument with Washington's way of accomplishing reform even though Walters wanted a more aggressive political stance. Chisum wrote:

I have been with our mutal (sic) friend the Bishop Tuesday, Wednesday and today, and beg to report: "He is alright with you, but thinks you are displeased with him. He thinks that somebody must keep up the fight for the radical element and feels that he can better afford to do so than you. He remarked today 'Dr. Washington is right in his course, it is for the thing most needed which he is doing – he is holding fast the friendship of a most important element of the whites that would be eternally lost to us, but for his tact and statesmanship.'"⁵⁰

The fight for black equality in the United States commenced in "all-out-war" from the standpoint of blacks. Like European and global counterparts in war, American blacks used the lucrative job of spying. They adopted the mindset of the ancient proverb that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," meaning opposing parties could work together against a shared enemy (chapter 4). While blacks such as BTW and W.E.B. DuBois held intra-racial disputes on how to strategize reform, they still had the same enemy, white supremacy, called Jim Crow laws. Some laws were written on plaques and others were assumed. Blacks never knew all of the

⁵⁰ Melvin J. Chisum to Booker T. Washington, 1 June 1907 (BTW Container 344), in Louis Harlan Papers, Box 41, Spies, Chisum folder, Special Collections, University of Maryland Libraries. Hereafter cited as Harlan Papers, UMD Libraries.

assumed laws. They participated in a spiritual life hoping to be led to liberation by their personal witness of the Divine.

A Christological vision allows for revelatory participation in the divine life. The power of the word of God permeates the world that God has liberated and redeemed through Jesus Christ. It is essentially God's grace that reached Chisum and Jack Johnson like it did Sojourner. Initially these two young Methodist boys went to God but withdrew because the God they found was not their own. Throughout their childhood the boys Melvin Chisum and Jack Johnson, Isaac William Young, and Emmett Scott, heard the scriptures read and explained to them (chapter 3). But they were never led to feel the scriptures were their own history. To use Neibuhr's phrase, it was "an external history" – a Christian history for whites only. Through experience they realized others' interpretation of the Word was not adequate. They chose to interpret the essential meaning of Scripture from the witness within them, as Sojourner Truth said it came from "within her." This development of terms and mindset sets a partial stage for a reading of the life and witness of Melvin Chisum, Sr.

CHAPTER III

IT IS NOT THE SIZE OF THE DOG IN THE FIGHT;
IT IS THE SIZE OF FIGHT IN THE DOG

“If ever you need a real genuine piece of steel send for me . . . [I] was born, reared, and raised in Texas, and may I be pardoned for saying, that nature in putting me together forgot to put in fear.”¹

--- Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr. to Booker T. Washington

Melvin Chisum is representative of men from his race, class, and socioeconomic group. Just to exist, they fought against racism, the psychological warfare waged against blackness, and economic barriers. Some died. Others were killed. Some excelled.² Chisum was one of the few to gain national prominence in the

¹ Melvin Chisum to Booker Washington, 4 October 1904, Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis Harlan, vol. 7 (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1972). 121. Hereafter cited as BTWP; Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 11 August 1933, Leonelle Young Hargrove Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Delaney-Browne Library, Oklahoma City University, hereafter cited as OKCU.

² Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church; The Negro in Our History*; Talbert; Richardson. These books give backgrounds of hundreds of black men born in the same era as Chisum. Many of these men faced the same burdens in life and trod like paths to survive.

Franklin Roosevelt Administration along with Anglo Americans such as James Farley who, though white, like Chisum, pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps.³

Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr., revealed in a letter that he felt forged from his birth to be “Texas Steel.” Steel is refined from impure metal. Unlike the process of smelting that involves a chemical change to the raw material, the final material in steel is identical chemically to the original one, but it is much purer. Texas was one of the most dangerous places on the planet for freedmen in the 1870s. The heritage of living *through* Reconstruction in Texas and, perhaps despite, living *during* that period forged Chisum into the “Duke” that his black colleagues respected. In the 1930s Chisum reached the zenith in his political career. This chapter describes the early life of Chisum – as one black man representative of many black men like him – who struggled to survive and find his way politically and socially during the early part of the twentieth century when blacks faced danger and instability. Evaluating the torments, joys, and concerns of his family, friends and mentors in the first three decades of his life assists in interpreting his understanding of race, religion, and his practice of aiding the needy. It offers a lens into his values of life as a family man.

At the pinnacle of his career Melvin Chisum wrote two more pertinent things about himself to a boyhood friend and adult political ally, Dr. Isaac William Young, president of Langston University in Oklahoma. In one letter he claimed, “Through all

³ Jackson and Harris talk about the psychological warfare waged against blacks during Reconstruction. David Jackson, *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy: The Southern Educational Tours, 1908-1912* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). 21-33; Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1880). xvii.

the years of my public experience, I have never once failed a friend. Have always striven arduously to serve disappointment and misery to my enemies without compunction, but friendship with me is a sacred relation and I treasure it as a gift of the gods.”⁴ In the other he stated that “when I had but little experience and my influence was negligible, I went about serving any and all men at my own expense: I do not have to do that now.”⁵ The letters give glimpses of how Chisum viewed himself and his life work psychologically, socially, and intellectually as a first generation freedman black. Chisum’s one major antagonist in life would be one he could not outrun and never outwitted – racism. Being an American black was like being tricked at birth: First you have to realize there is a trick. Then you have to admit the trick is on you. Then to survive you turn the trick back on the trickster.⁶ One never lets down his guard.

Following the life of Melvin Jackson Chisum from the early 1870s to 1945 is like playing modern games that follow unique characters who though ever-present, move around the world unnoticed. Melvin Chisum, Sr., crops up behind the scenes in the midst of major American historical events and personages in the United States; from the Second Civil War in Texas, in stories of robber barons, Pullman porters, Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, all the way up to through World War II.

⁴ Melvin Chisum to Dr. Isaac William Young, 6 September 1933, OKCU.

⁵ Melvin Chisum to Dr. Isaac William Young, 14 October 1933, OKCU.

⁶ Interview with Leon Brooks, Mechanicsville, Virginia, 23 November 2017, OKCU. As an American black, Brooks learned the premise in class at the segregated Virginia Union University, Richmond VA in the 1970s when he studied the Uncle Remus Tales. In the 1990s Brooks brought suit against the Virginia Air National Guard to have the Confederate flag removed from its airplanes. He was soon let go. In 2018 he is still fighting for his privileges from the Virginia Air National Guard.

Chisum was born in the early 1870s in the lush Tehuacana Hills near Mexia, Texas. During his infancy, ex-Confederate soldiers and other Anglo Texans murdered hundreds of blacks living in the heavy wooded land along the banks of the Navasota River. The Chisum family looked to God for their survival, federal soldiers for their protection, and men of steel like Merritt Trammell (1832-1875) for leadership. Trammell became the grass-roots leader for blacks and preached with a loaded shotgun by his pulpit. An ex-slave of the Stroud plantation, he snuck out of the Mexia area, crossed the region between Limestone County and Waco, Texas, on horseback, to bring a particular troop of Union soldiers to protect Afro-Texans from terrorists.

As a toddler, if not little more than an infant, Chisum participated in acts of political and social intrigue to protect Afro Texans. One must imagine a small child with a dark coffee-bean complexion, who rolled himself so tightly into a ball that all one could see was the fluff of his baby hair because his hands covered his face as he was hurled through the air like a ball. Chisum's first memory was being passed from the hands of one Union cavalryman to another. The soldiers in Prussian blue jackets and Hardee hats were rescuers.

Children such as Chisum were not safe but handled, hunted, and treated like animals. Black children learned from their elders to transform their minds to find ways to manipulate their bodies, souls, and beings to become like the animals in

Uncle Remus's tale "Plantation Witch."⁷ Chisum's contemporary, educator Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955), confessed that blacks, particularly women, felt like animals, as "animated agricultural implement[s] to augment the service of mules and plows in cultivating and harvesting the cotton crop." Women such as Chisum's twelve-year-old child-mother were "automatic incubators, a producer of human livestock, beneath whose heart and lungs more potential laborers could be bred and nurtured and brought to the light of toilsome day."⁸ Black men and women used the stories, later written down by Joel Chandler Harris, to teach survival. Brer Rabbit and his associates were an extension of their lives and the stories were stories of life during slavery and Reconstruction.

The first cries of young babies were probably stifled, hushed, pushed back in their mouths by their mother's breath. These children from birth were taught the art of disguising their inner feelings and needs in order to survive in the Texas world of white oppression. Sometimes in the black life it is good to live out the lowest common denominator one could, making it easy to become an animal or a ball.

Chisum's son, Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., (1921-2014), admitted his father told him that being passed off between soldiers was the earliest event he could remember: "Of

⁷ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Appleton-Century Company, 1934), xvii. Harris wrote "Uncle Remus describes Reconstruction through his stories to the young child who is a product of that practical reconstruction which has been going on to some extent since the war in spite of the politicians."

⁸ Mary McLeod Bethune, "A Century of Progress of Negro Women," n.d., Mary McLeod Bethune Collection, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University; Mary McLeod Bethune, *A Century of Progress of Negro Women*, ed. Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Random House, 1972), 580.

course, he was a young boy and he thought that was the greatest thing in the world. That was great fun as far as he was concerned.” For Melvin Chisum, “being a ball” for the cavalrymen, was a privilege and life for a child of Reconstruction. He kept them occupied and his community safe. In his memory, he participated with little fear in acts of valor to protect both his family and the disenfranchised – and would do so until his death in 1945.

Before he learned to read and write he was taught survival. As in the stories of Brer Rabbit, in his youth Brer Melvin ached the art of shape shifting, reaching to the back of his neck and pulling out another personality to fit whatever precarious situation that came his way. In the *Uncle Remus* story “Plantation Witch,” witches sometimes shifted into the shape of animals by reaching into themselves and becoming whatever they needed to be in order to survive. Uncle Remus describes the transition: “dat witch fokes is got a slit in de back er de neck, en w’en day wanter change derse’f, dey jus pull de hide over der head same ez if ‘twuz a shut, en dar dey is.”⁹ African and Indian lore taught blacks they could change into ravens and fly if necessary. Black authors still pass on the tales about blacks and their ability to shift into birds and other animals. In *The People Could Fly* (2004) the author treats the act as real.¹⁰ According to Virginia Hamilton, the art of shape shifting did not die; the people just got too far away from the experience. Brer Melvin, who shape-shifted into a ball, just like in the Uncle Remus tale, kept the government soldiers occupied so they would “tarry a while” in Mexia or perhaps they stopped because his father

⁹ Harris, “Plantation Witch,” in *Uncle Remus*, 154.

¹⁰ Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: The Picture Book* (New York: Random House, 2004).

was a groom for a cavalry officer, or merely that he was accessible; either way a child who was a ball offers another link to Reconstruction history in Texas. At least he lived, unlike some black babies who were used as alligator bait.¹¹

Such details develop an understanding of what it meant for Melvin Chisum to compare himself to “Texas steel” in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was not just an outside war that Chisum fought but an inner struggle in dealing with his blackness. According to David Jackson, Jr., in *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle Against White Supremacy*, Chisum’s generation fought against white backlash. Jackson described it as the cult of whiteness, “a full scale psychological war against blacks in order to make them hate themselves and develop an inferiority complex” about themselves and about other blacks.¹² Melvin Chisum developed a formula for success during his lifetime. Men like him who had to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” or, as he was known to say, men who went to the school of “hard knocks,” were refined by their endeavors. Like Texas Steel, he chose for a period, to serve men at his own expense.¹³ The legacy of a child in Reconstruction placating bored Union troops while they protected Afro Texans uncovers the psychology

¹¹ Dominique Foxworth, “The Gut-wrenching History of Black Babies and Alligators,” *The Undeclared*, 22 June 2016. *Theundeclared.com*. While some historians claim it never happened, Foxworth dates the practice of feeding black babies to alligators back to the 19th century. Sharon Draper, *The Copper Sun* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

¹² David Jackson, Jr., *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy: The Southern Educational Tours, 1908-1912* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21. See Geoffrey Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson*, (New York: Random House, 2004). Deborah Gabriel, *Layers of Blackness: Colourism in the African Diaspora*, (Imani Media Ltd. British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication 2007.)

¹³ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 14 October 1933, OKCU.

Chisum developed that turned him into an efficiency agent, detective, not just as an agent and investigator for the Public Works Administration, but also as a man from whom George Washington Carver always expected to hear nothing but the truth.¹⁴ Thus, psychologically, using his body for a toy is not so far away from using his body as a battering ram, as an instrument in the fighting ring in order to support a family. This chapter moves with Melvin Chisum from his infancy and through the names he adopted to fit the niches where he found himself: from Melvin, to Jack Chisum, to Texas Rosebud, and back to Melvin Jackson Chisum; it will demonstrate that he was refined by others, but that he also refined himself.

Chisum's Unique Links to Slavery, Reconstruction and Afro-Texan Heroes

The period in Texas history in which Chisum was born is sometimes called the Second Civil War. Even though the Civil War ended years before he was born, racial battles spilled into Waco and Limestone County, Texas. Anglo Confederate soldiers returned from war, bitter about the loss of the Confederacy and the loss of land, suffering from angst about the freeing of over 4,000,000 slaves, and the loss of the wealth they represented; they then became enraged because blacks gained voting privileges. They had blood on their hands and murder in their hearts. These men spewed their fury toward freedmen. The Reconstruction narrative in Texas takes on new meaning by adding the life of Melvin Chisum and his family.

¹⁴ George Washington Carver to Melvin Chisum, 3 February 1933, OKCU.

Historian John Hope Franklin described the public life in the area of Limestone County, Texas, of which Mexia was carved, as being in the midst of a kind of “guerilla warfare.”¹⁵ Some Afro-Texans tolerated whatever needed to be done in order to survive. Black families, such as John Chisum’s, Melvin’s father, lived daily in fear of being attacked and killed by murderers. Some blacks sniped back at Confederate villains with guns, using guerilla warfare themselves as they battled for their lives, liberties, and freedom against a system of white supremacy and violence. Other blacks in the Limestone County area, already badly battered, were often so afraid of acts of vengeance from returning ex-confederate soldiers – historian James Smallwood called them “terrorists” – that they barred their doors and windows and cut their lamps and candles low if they remained in their cabins at night. Others slept in the woods. Moreover, no person of color was safe, even in going to the river to fish during the daylight hours. Returning soldier Simp “Dixie” Dixon, rumored to be a relative of outlaw and murderer John Wesley Hardin, made an elderly freed slave woman dance as he shot at her. He told her to pray, then as she prayed he shot her in the back of her head.¹⁶

Under these circumstances, as a concession to murdering black townspeople, John Chisum looked on as “one of the Union cavalryman would have him [Melvin] under his arm, and another Union Cavalryman would be on a horse facing him. Then

¹⁵ John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 249. James M. Smallwood, *Murder and Mayhem: The War of Reconstruction in Texas* (College Station: Texas A. & M. University Press, 2003).

¹⁶ Walter Cotton, *History of Negroes in Limestone County* (n.p.; n.p.), 11, Mexia Public Library, Mexia, Texas.

they would ride toward each other and pass him off between them.”¹⁷ Through his early experiences Melvin Chisum probably learned the dynamics of survival but learned the idea of invincibility from African American stories. Later in life wanted posters did not have his name but sought a man who thought himself invincible enough to run the gamut of helping field workers, guarded by armed men, steal away from the southern fields during the light of day.

Children such as Melvin Chisum quickly learned to do what was required to survive in situations of warfare. John Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus* put in words what youngsters of Chisum’s time period dealt with daily. Chandler agreed with historian David Jackson, Jr., who noted that white supremacy and the coming Jim Crow laws were a type of psychological warfare played on Reconstruction American black adults and children. To the Anglo boy to whom Uncle Remus told the tale, Brer Rabbit may have been a trickster, but to Afro-Texans he bore no badge as trickster but taught the art of survival. William Twine, a newcomer to Mexia in the early 1870s, described the art of survival on the part of children: “They [children] were strong, industrious, willing to please to any extreme and quieter than mice, education was their opiate, journalism a tool for liberty. It was the voice from the abyss that let others know their ordeal.”¹⁸ Stories of terror were passed across the state, mouth to mouth, and by the newspapers. According to Smallwood’s research,

¹⁷ Utrice Leid, *The Twine, Twyne, Goggins Family Reunion 2013*, (New York, unpublished) 67; Linda Twine, *Conversations: Oklahoma Twines Centennial Celebration, 1891-1991*, (Oklahoma: Self Published 1991), 3.

¹⁸ *Muskogee Cimeter* (Oklahoma), 8 May 1915. Twine was a contemporary of Chisum who eventually moved to Oklahoma. His newspaper was well known. His sons started the first black law firm in Oklahoma. His granddaughter, Gloria Twine, later married Melvin Chisum, Jr.

terrorist groups organized and roamed Texas calling themselves “Nigger Killers.” They would kill a freedman for seventy –five cents. In at least one instance a black child was killed in his tracks just because he had his hands in his pockets and did not stand at attention when a gang member rode by. Sometimes these gunmen went on six- and seven-day shooting sprees killing blacks.¹⁹ Brer Rabbit taught how to hide in plain sight; children needed to know how to accomplish this feat.

The linguistic term of “childhood” was not part of slave or early Reconstruction meta-language. A black child served as a slave or worker. Because of the destruction of the family, the need for labor, and the use of men as breeders at the first sign of female puberty during slavery, children during Reconstruction in the Limestone County area had no concept of newborn, infant, and toddler. As a child began to walk, he or she could work and learned techniques of survival. One gets the impression that the age of twelve seemed to be “adulthood,” but actually it was simply the average age of the onset of puberty. It appears from records of marriages between the 1870s and the 1890s that the age of “consent” for girls to wed was between twelve and fourteen years old—again obviously tied to age at puberty. Melvin Chisum was born when his mother was between twelve and fourteen, and as a toddler he worked in the fields. Teaching children the possibilities for justice through newspapers and the providence of a mighty power known as God probably started in what modernity terms newborn.

¹⁹ Smallwood, *Murder and Mayhem*, 47-49, 99. Norman Brown and Chuck Parsons, *A Lawless Breed: John Wesley Hardin, Texas Reconstruction and Violence in the Wild West*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2013), 29.

Anglo-Texan newspaper editors played a major part in the Texas racial civil warfare during Reconstruction by pitting whites against their black counterparts. David Blight in *Race and Reunion* observed that “in the minds of many white Democratic editors, race theory and racial fear worked hand in hand with antiradical politics. Republican misrule, went the argument, had stolen the rights of whites and disrupted the natural place of blacks in society.”²⁰ Blacks listened to preacher Merritt Trammell who spoke of God-given valor and power at Mt. Zion, the first black church in the Limestone County area. The God that Trammell taught about was different from the white God who labeled them slaves from the curse of Ham or the Calvinistic teaching that they were born slaves and therefore created to remain subservient to white male landowners.²¹

How did their local understanding of Trammell as a race leader and preacher pit him against white newspapers who labeled Trammell a troublemaker? Dr. Henry Ponder (1928), educator and president of several black colleges and universities, learned the story of a lion in his youth: “The little lion walked up to his daddy and said, ‘Daddy if we are the king of the jungle why does the hunter always win? His father said when lions start writing history the lions will win.’” Somewhere blacks learned that newspapers were a vehicle for their “voice from the abyss,” as Twine described it, to be heard and to let others know of their plight. In Limestone County

²⁰ David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001), 101.

²¹ Based on 1674 Westminster Confession of faith Catechism #1, Of Providence V. and Baptism XXVIII. Born as God had chosen, slaves were not baptized into freedom - “whom the son sets free is free indeed” (Bible John 8:36) - but baptized into being the best slaves they could be.

blacks such as the Chisum family waited, watched, and hoped for, liberation from the intrinsic evil in their community, in their country. Melvin Chisum would learn to write.

Chisum was born January 12, 1873? (circa 1870) in the Tehuacana Hills of Texas. His father, John Chisum (1847/1854-1919), was born a slave in Macon, Georgia, and was named after his owner John Chisholm, a cousin of Jesse Chisholm who laid out the Chisholm Trail. While living in Georgia, John Chisholm realized the South might just lose the Civil War. "He must have been a man of substance, the head of a prosperous family," according to Dr. Chisum. "He had the foresight, strength, resourcefulness, and initiative to put his family and what part of his personal possessions he was able to transport, including his slaves, onto wagons and move them to Texas when he foresaw the South losing the war."²² The owner took his possessions, followed the trail of other slaveholders from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi who had migrated to Texas at the outbreak of the Civil War, and encamped in the Tehuacana Hills. Other slave owners such as the Stroud family in Limestone County and the Harlan family in Robertson County had settled there in the 1830s. After the Civil War, some of these groups of disenfranchised slave owners, their extended families, and returning fighters developed into the the gangs of murderers in Mexia and surrounding territories.

The *Mexia Evening Ledger* described John Chisum, Melvin's father, as "a quiet peaceable colored citizen" which meant he was unlike his wife's relatives who

²² Dr. Melvin J Chisum, Jr., to Cecelia Brooks, 21 March 2006, OKCU.

warred against whites in the 1870s.²³ John Chisum looked like a matured copy of his son, about five feet six, dark, nappy headed, openly niggardly when he wanted but inwardly clear-sighted and Machiavellian – the ideal “Daddy Brer Rabbit” to his son. He dealt with the adversity around him through means learned in the oppression of slavery. Looking back to a time of guerilla warfare in Mexia, John Chisum displayed cunning in allowing his son to be so well recognized by the soldiers. The legend behind John Chisum is hard to prove but interesting. According to Dr. Chisum:

Several years after the war was over, President Grant sent Cavalry squadrons down to Texas to repatriate these southerners who had fled to get away from the army. When this particular United States Cavalry officer had finally caught up with John Chisholm, he told John Chisholm that he was going to confiscate his horse right then because he had a very beautiful horse. John Chisholm replied, “Well, if you are going to take that horse, take that young boy right there. That’s his groom and he’s the only person who knows how to take care of that horse.” That was my grandfather and that is how he took on this master’s name. I guess he was freed technically at that moment and he went to work for this army captain who took the horse.²⁴

Possibly it was this group of soldiers that Merritt Trammell enlisted to help Afro-Texans. There is more to the story. In the Mexia area former slaveholders refused to free their former slaves after the Civil War was over and even after Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment on January 31, 1865, then ratified December 6, 1865. It stated clearly that “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” On the

²³ *Mexia Evening Ledger* (Texas), 24 June 1899.

²⁴ Twine, *Conversations*, 3.

Stroud plantation the Emancipation Proclamation (1863) was read in July of 1865. According to research by Smallwood, John Chisholm withdrew deeply into the confines of Eastern Texas and did not free his slaves until the next year.²⁵ Blacks, thinking they were soldiers after the war, labored for quartermasters and plantations in Texas. Smallwood's research bridges the two stories. It is possible John Chisum was freed years after the end of slavery.

After John Chisum's arrival back in Mexia, he jumped the broom with Rachel Arvelia Henderson (1858/1860-1904), a freed slave from the Stroud plantation. These dates overlap, giving Melvin's birth year some three to four years in question. In comparison to other freed girls in the area during Reconstruction, twelve to fourteen years of age seemed to be the age of consent. Smallwood recounts that many adult women from the Stroud and surrounding plantations were psychologically battered from mandatory rape at puberty, which continued into adulthood, and they had difficulty with the idea of marriage in the Reconstruction years. Slave narratives reveal that women too young to have had sex suffered from shock, developed fears of men, and never married.²⁶ Therefore, it seems young girls who came to puberty after slavery ended, such as Rachel and her cousin Mittie, married with a clean slate or they married quickly to keep the old codes for women

²⁵ James M. Smallwood, "Black Texans During Reconstruction, 1865-1874." (PhD diss., Texas Tech University, 1974). James M. Smallwood, *Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texas During Reconstruction*, (New York: Kennikat Press 1981), 34.

²⁶ Sam Jones Washington, *Sam Jones Washington Fort Worth Texas*, manuscript From Library of Congress, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938*, <https://www.loc.gov/item/mesnp164138/> (accessed March 11, 2016); Smallwood, "Black Texans During Reconstruction," 48.

at bay. John and Rachel later took the rites of matrimony on September 15, 1884, at Groesbeck, Texas.

Ray Walker, in *A History of Limestone County*, reported, “No estimated damage has ever been made of the atrocious acts committed during these troublesome times, but it is safe to surmise that literally hundreds of Negroes were murdered. Various groups attempted to destroy the records and evidently did a good job; few records have been located prior to 1874.”²⁷ Melvin Chisum was born to young parents in the midst of “an unrecorded reign of terror.” His episode of “flying” depicted the end of years of racial tension that grew and exploded into outright race war in Limestone County. During the Civil War when whites went to fight, a mix of illiterate blacks, who had not been invited to join the war, along with “Impudent white[s] who didn’t think enough of the South to fight for her during the war,” remained in Limestone County.²⁸

An unbiased account of what happened in Limestone County has not been written. According to Ray Walker, “a reign of terror” began with Charles Culver’s appointment by the Freedman’s Bureau to aid blacks in gaining property. However, Walker cites the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation on the Logan Stroud plantation as the moment “when the real trouble began.”²⁹ Walker meant that after the war blacks had the power to vote, and with their votes they elected Afro-Texans

²⁷ Ray Walker, *A History of Limestone County* (Austin, TX: Von Boeckmann-Jones, 1959), 55.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54; Walter Cotton, *History of Negroes in Limestone County* (n.p.; n.p.), 18, Mexia Public Library, Mexia, Texas; Smallwood, *Murder and Mayhem*, 124.

into prominent positions. When hostile whites who fought for the Confederacy returned after the war, the area flamed into one of the most racially intense zones in the country. Melvin Chisum grew up in what Freedman's Bureau agent Albert Evans called a volatile area. Texans' blood flowed crimson in the rivers from the murders of blacks and whites intent on redefining their ownership of property, rights, and race superiority that had not existed previously. During Reconstruction returning soldiers contended with blacks, who once had been slaves, without protections of American citizenship. These blacks now claimed their rights of life, liberty, and justice in places and spaces, tangible and intangible, which once belonged only to whites. A primary problem was that according to Jason Warren in *Drawdown*, after the war the only organized rebel army left over from the Confederacy was in Texas.³⁰

Members of Melvin Chisum's mother's plantation family played star roles in the guerilla warfare. At the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation, Merritt Trammell made a pulpit, knelt, and prayed for deliverance. In 1870 Trammell had "felt the urge to become a minister and founded a church and named it Mt. Zion."³¹ From the pulpit of the first black church in the area, Trammell preached valor, African courage "ushujaa," and African Zulu "amandla" power.³² He preached and taught much the same mysticism that Melvin Chisum would find in Bishop William Derrick of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1890s. Trammel became

³⁰ Jason Warren, *Drawdown: The American Way of Postwar* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 124.

³¹ Cotton, *History of Negroes*, 12.

³² Barry A. Crouch and Donaly E. Brice, *The Governor's Hounds: The Texas State Police, 1870-1873* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 103.

“the acknowledged leader of Negroes.” Melvin Chisum’s mother, Rachael Henderson Chisum, was linked to Trammell. Trammel was a Harlan family bastard. He carried the maiden surname of his owner’s mother.

Like John Chisholm, (the prior owner of Melvin Chisum’s father), Logan Stroud (1814-1911), was originally from Macon County, Georgia. While Chisholm was a small slave owner, Stroud was the largest slave owner in Limestone County. Stroud’s wife was Jane Elizabeth Harlan. Stroud, his father, and brothers were among the first permanent settlers in 1837 in the area that became Limestone County. Using between one hundred and one hundred fifty slaves, the Strouds raised cattle, corn, and cotton on six hundred acres.³³

After the war blacks gained the power of the vote and elected men from their own race into political positions from local police forces to seats in the state legislature. By the Reconstruction Acts, some Anglos became Republicans. Democratic Anglos were disenfranchised in the Limestone County. Ralph Long became a Republican Party boss, but Merritt Trammell remained the grass-roots leader. Tammell became a member of the Texas State Police, a new group of lawmen in charge of enforcing law and order in Texas. Negroes such as Giles Cotton (bastard of the Stroud family who was used to impregnate girls at puberty), and Dave Medlock (bastard of the Stroud family who drove crops to market in Galveston), both illiterate former slaves, were elected as state representatives. Uncle Burk

³³ Randolph Campbell, *An Empire of Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989). 275.

Simpson from the Stroud plantation interpreted the racial environment during Reconstruction this way:

It must be remembered that these [Black] men who were elected as representatives, could not read or write, neither did they have the remotest idea of constitutional law, yet, thrust instantly into positions of grave importance whereby the rebuilding of a war-torn country and to promote a friendly relationship between the two races that were destined to live side by side and work out their own salvation. These measures were considered by the southern, white man as a slap in the face while he was down, and there germinated into his brain terrorizing organizations to frighten the illiterate Negro away from the voting polls as well as a fear to attempt to hold a public office.³⁴

Ralph Long was paid to look the other way as blacks were frightened, maimed, and killed. Whites had planned on “terrorizing organizations to frighten the illiterate Negroes away from the voting polls and any attempt to hold public office.”³⁵ Trammell, Mitch Cotton, and an unnamed black policeman, one of at least three black policemen in Precinct 1 of Limestone County, resisted white domination.

Without the support from locals to deal with the outright violent acts against Afro Texans, Merritt Trammell snuck out on horseback to Waco, returning with a company of Union soldiers stationed in Waco and Corsicana commanded by Sergeant Adam Desch. Trammell helped the company surprise Simp “Dixie” Dixon

³⁴ Cotton, *History of Negroes*, 25. George Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007); David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (Charlotte North Carolina: Paw Prints, 2008).

³⁵ Cotton, *History of Negroes*, 25.

“in a deserted cabin, cutting him off from his trained horse.”³⁶ He was shot attempting to get away from the soldiers. The Union force then deputized Trammell and other blacks. In the aftermath of another hanging of a black man by whites, the deputies followed the murderers into a saloon. Two white men, Dan Gallagher and former mayor D. C. Applewhite, and three black policemen in uniform, Trammell, Cotton, and another unnamed black man, had a showdown at Clark’s Saloon on Navasota Street in Groesbeck, Texas. Applewhite was killed. After the pivotal “shoot out,” only one man’s words rang across the state about the incident. J. D. Parish, a friend of Applewhite’s, claimed that after killing Applewhite, the black policemen brandished their six-shooters and called out in a loud voice that blacks would have the town “flowing with white blood before the morning.” By the following morning, October 1, blacks were reportedly rallying to attack the town. In time an illegal, radical “Rump Senate” put the county under martial law. All black policemen and office holders were removed from power. Trammell and Cotton were considered outlaws instead of lawmen.

Cotton managed to flee because the Anglos determined that he was mortally wounded. They left him “on a cot to die in the jail,” while they hunted Trammell. Cotton escaped across the Red River into Indian Territory. Trammell changed his name and lived in exile. Racial tensions remained high in the Limestone County-Waco area so long afterward that Cotton did not reveal his location to his relatives until 1926. Cotton died in 1929. Trammell went rogue, but he did not give up his cause as leader of the black community. Instead, he became described – as Chisum

³⁶ Ibid., 19.

in his latter years would be - an “outlaw by nature and a demon by practice.”³⁷ He moved into a cave on the west bank of the Navasota River, and “like a lion at bay he fought off his attackers.”³⁸ The cave front was protected by the river and planked in the rear and on both sides. It was a fortress against invaders. Trammell’s demise came through his friendship with M. D. L. Harcrow: “A white man . . . who was also afoul of the law, made a deal with the authorities for his release in return for putting Merritt on the spot.”³⁹

While Trammell slept, Harcrow poisoned his friend’s whiskey. The *Daily Democratic Statesman* newspaper wrote that Harcrow then filled Trammell’s body with buckshot. He took it to the sheriff in Groesbeck, remarking, “here’s your “n-----.” Harcrow received a reward of \$300 (some books say \$500). Hope of a satisfactory Reconstruction Era ended for blacks in Limestone County after the murder of Trammell by a white cohort. There was no longer honor among friends.

New Anglo leaders in Limestone County instituted black codes that limited the lives of freedmen. Dixon’s desperado friends pulled jailed blacks out into the streets and hanged them. Rebellion on the part of the Afro Texans failed. There was little else to hope for except education and the railroad that now passed through Mexia. The struggle to survive gave dignity to the choices blacks had to make. There

³⁷ Mary Hintz, *Early History of Limestone County Organized As A Study For Teaching a Local History Unit*, Masters Thesis, Southwest Texas State Teachers College, 1943.

³⁸ Cotton, *History of Negroes*, 12.

³⁹ Donald Brice Barry Crouch, *The Governor's Hounds: The Texas State Police, 1870-1873*, (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2012). Leslie, *Freedom After Slavery: The Black Experience and the Freedmen’s Bureau in Reconstruction Texas* (Indiana: Trafford Publishing, 2012), 61, 113.

was no perfect choice for the Afro Texans in Limestone County or other parts of the South: First you find out the trick is on you. Then you turn the trick back on them.

In a world of severely limited opportunities, economic depression, and racial oppression, what does a slave parent turn to in order to help a child identify himself in the world where his dark color spurs hatred? What kind of ideas can be gleaned from the history of American blacks to set a standard for a child to achieve? How does one define oneself: by the external labels and limitations the world sets, or by the power, the mover, and manipulator of their world, the one who silently but surely leaves his mark upon history? What quiet self-assurance and skills would guide a man to claim himself as a chameleon and a trickster for his own time, the man who makes and unmakes the powerful and who studies situations and masterfully moves the world as if it is his chess board? How does one claim the power and not get entrapped by its trappings? A boy such as Melvin Chisum strides silently upon the world stage. He draws not attention to himself and his maneuvering.

While modernity looks back in horror at such wild horrendous narratives, like the mystical Brer Rabbit, the oppressed learned to manipulate situations to gain positive results. The nature that developed in men such as Chisum was surely different from that of the “Negro resolve” indicated by Robert Cruden in *The Negro in Reconstruction*, the blacks who just wanted everything to be equal: “That we have no feeling of resentment toward our former owners, but we are willing to let the past be buried with the past, and in the future treat persons with kindness and

respect who shall treat us likewise.”⁴⁰ The Texas kind of oppression developed a need for blacks to become tricksters (survivors) and led to their work as valuable political Warwicks. Warwick was a political manipulator in England in the fifteenth century who was the power behind the throne. Some men like Warwick, learned that making kings rather than being the king offered just as much power to that individual. This part of history seems to have been passed down from father to son.

Leaving Mexia: Finding A Way Out

What does one do with a quick-witted, fast-thinking black youth outside of the field and ranch work? In the continuing Second Civil War in his hometown of Mexia, one can speculate why at the age of four with only his wit, his strength, family backing, and cunning, Melvin Chisum’s family sent him on a journey with a Methodist circuit rider. Instead of laboring in Mexia under the tutelage of his teacher William Twine and working as a sharecropper, Chisum would receive the gift of an education, a major step toward psychological and physical freedom. Perhaps Rachel Chisum had not learned to treat her son differently than generations before her. According to Smallwood, during slavery compulsory breeding ruined relationships between mothers and their offspring. Mothers had no time with their babies and

⁴⁰ Robert Cruden, *The Negro in Reconstruction* (Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 4.

were sent directly into the fields after birth letting older females to care for babies. In this way there was not a lot of time for bonding between mother and child.⁴¹

Education was the panacea—a kind of magic potion—for the illiterate war-torn community. They believed that perhaps education could destroy racism, deliver them from the burden of their slave past, and open their lives to success. Education, like the tree of life, was denied to them in slavery and out of slavery.

Education became the central theme in the struggle to survive, or as James Cone refers to in *The God of the Oppressed*, “the belief that there is meaning in life that extends beyond the structures created by the oppressors.”⁴² The Christian dialectic or contention was that God enters into the social context of human existence and appropriates the ideas and actions of the oppressed as God’s own. Cone’s theory helps show that the plight of the black family in the Reconstruction narrative was the same plight of Brer Rabbit, and that both were same as the plight of a man named Jesus. Brer Rabbit’s freedom was compared to Jesus’s biblical resurrection. Blacks fought for education that led to freedom and justice because their future was grounded in the struggle for liberation. A church-centered education was like magic. Magic was the spirit of God’s liberation. There was God’s spirit in the books, in learning, in others’ histories, and it could be appropriated. In education, blacks developed their own genre of Christianity and would find what

⁴¹ Smallwood, *Black Texans During Reconstruction*, James Smallwood, "Black Texans During Reconstruction 1865-1874" (Texas Tech University, 1974). 48; Francis Hunter, "Slave Society on the Southern Plantation," *Journal of Negro History*, VII, January 22, 1922.

⁴² James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 96-97.

they needed in a historical faith. Methodism, with its convenient grace and dialectic of choice, appropriated that faith as far back as the creation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), which grew out of the Free African Society in 1787.

As Melvin Chisum, now nicknamed “Jack,” traveled his journey to an education, all the stories about animals and their magical ways, and of course survival, probably stayed in his mind night and day. He had to survive. Perhaps his life was like the generations of children before him. History does not reveal the route Chisum took on his journey, or the names of the people who accompanied him. Perhaps one or both parents, or another member of the local black community, or a representative of the Methodist school, went along with the young boy. Whatever the answers to these unknowns may be, their story and his are prime examples of aspirational bravery.

The question of the education of the first generation of free black children plagued the South during Reconstruction. It was difficult enough to establish and maintain schools for whites, much less develop schools for black children. However, the duty of the government’s Freedman’s Bureau was to gather “the neglected and perishing orphans of colored Union Soldiers, scattered, lost as dying in the streets,” and place them into schools.⁴³ The Methodist Church North experimented with education of black children across the country through their own Freedman’s Aid Society. They believed that “whoever furnished the education of a people controls

⁴³ W. D. Goodman, *Gilbert Academy and Agriculture College, Winstead Louisiana: Selections from a Journal* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, 1892), 49.

the current of thought, and molds future generations.”⁴⁴ The church’s goal was to select the most promising black pupils, place them in the normal schools, and prepare them as rapidly as possible to provide the country with well-qualified guides and educators for black people.⁴⁵

No child labor laws existed in Texas. In Texas, planters, with few exceptions, viewed education of black children as a threat to the racial labor supply on which their livelihoods depended. Black codes mandated that blacks, even children, who were not working, were vagrants and subject to jail or labor. Planters were pragmatic in their aims to stop young children from being educated. From the mid- to late-1870s, the landowners dominated and controlled state governments and virtually froze the ex-slaves’ educational opportunities. They suppressed taxes, opposed compulsory school attendance laws, and blocked passage of laws to strengthen public education. “Force, rather than rational free choice was the basis of the South’s political economy.”⁴⁶ A boy had to have cunning to remain free during the period and have wit enough to stay out of bondage to get an education. According to historian Eric Foner in *A Short History of Reconstruction 1863-1877*, all-

⁴⁴ Freedmen’s Aid Society, *Annual Report of the Freedmen’s Aid Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1869), 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ James Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 22-25.

white police enforced complex labor regulations, criminal laws, and judicial systems called “fence laws” to keep blacks disenfranchised.⁴⁷

Books such as James Brawley’s, *Two Centuries of Methodist Concern: Bondage, Freedom and the Education of Black People* shows the conscious, intentional, effort on the part of the Northern Methodist church to deal with the whole being of the ex-slaves and first generation of freedmen.⁴⁸ In his preface Brawley wrote:

There was a need for self-discovery as Freedmen in a new society and self – appraisal as persons with large human potential, rather than chattel property or inferior beings in a society of so-called superiors. The Freedmen had to be rehabilitated from the annihilating ravages of personality of slavery, and to create self-confidence and group consciousness. They had to overcome conditioning experiences and stigma of a caste classification, designation as chattel property, and the label of inferiority without ability to learn complex lessons, consigned to a “place” in society as only “hewers of wood and drawers of water.”⁴⁹

The lives of youngsters such as Chisum and his friends were actually anything but simple. Gaining an education was more than just going to school. As little more than toddlers, young boys (rarely young girls) were turned over to white, itinerate, northern Methodist preachers for an education under the churches Freedman’s Aid Society. The church acted much like the government’s Freedman’s Bureau under major General Oliver O. Howard. The Freedman’s Bureau covered freedmen and

⁴⁷ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 95.

⁴⁸ James Brawley, *Two Centuries of Methodist Concern: Bondage, Freedom, and Education of Black People* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

refugees. To establish their schools and experiment with black education, the white Methodist denomination moved around the country looking for smart boys who could be leaders. Chisum fell into this classification. Barely free from the hands of soldiers who tossed him between their horses, Chisum was carried to the Dallas area to be trained to function as a leader in America.

Reverend George Warren Richardson, a red haired, fire-and-brimstone, Methodist North minister from Minnesota, who had a lame arm and a heart for Christianity, had no compunction in taking boys into his traveling school. Richardson was born in Erie County, New York, in 1824. He was a man of strict piety and ardently opposed slavery. He had served as a link in the Underground Railroad, chaplain to the 7th U.S. Colored Artillery Regiment at Fort Pickering, Tennessee, during the Civil War, and continued his efforts to support the freedmen as a Methodist preacher and teacher. While historian John Hope Franklin describes many carpetbaggers as preoccupied with building alliances with the business community and the Republican-controlled government, Richardson concentrated on service to the community and instilling the Christian ethic and education in youth.⁵⁰

St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church in Dallas, Texas, began in a brush arbor near a slave cemetery in an area called Freedman's Town. The attraction of the jobs associated with the Houston and Texas Central and the Texas and Pacific Railroad companies led many blacks to the area. With the aid of Rev. Richardson, black

⁵⁰ John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction after the Civil War Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, 1994), 102-103; James D. Richardson, "My Journey to the Crossroads of Race, Faith and Family in America: Tracing my Ancestor's Footsteps," Alicia Patterson Foundation, <http://aliciapatterson.org>.

preachers Charles Madison, Mack Henson, Jeremiah Webster, H. Boliver, and William Bush established the church and school in a shabbily-built, cold, wood-frame building. Students paid one dollar a month in tuition. Under harsh conditions, living intimately with their teachers, day in and day out, students “mastered higher elements of English, literary criticism, higher mathematics, Latin, Greek, philosophy, trades and other cultural branches.”⁵¹ In April of 1876 the Ku Klux Klan burned down the church and school. According to Richardson, “Our scholars stood about us crying because they could not go to school anymore. . . . We assured them that we would not leave them.” Working with the children and the black community, “we pressed into service every colored man that could use a saw or drive a nail. That was a busy afternoon. The sound of hammers did not cease till 9 o’clock, then we carried the seats we had saved from the fire and our building was ready for dedication.”⁵² The school eventually grew to one hundred and twenty students, but Chisum did not finish his education in the school. During this period Jim Crow entered the general church and the Methodist Episcopal denomination segregated into black and white conferences. Between 1877 and 1878 the school and the children became mobile, moving from northern to southern Texas. The rationale behind this, according to Richardson’s son Owen, was that the school faced backlash because they “upstaged the white pupils in Dallas in a citywide exhibition of learning skills.” Soon after the exhibition, the school system appropriated a test for all teachers that blacks could

⁵¹ Brawley, *Two Centuries of Methodist Concern*, 99.

⁵² Richardson, “My Journey to the Crossroads,” 18.

not pass. Thereafter, the Dallas Public School System closed the St. Paul's School. The church remained, but the school moved to Houston and then to Austin, Texas.⁵³

From age four to approximately twelve years old, Melvin Chisum traveled this educational network across Texas. Through his schooling, he met and befriended a first-year student, "Jack" Johnson (1878-1946), who would later become the first black heavyweight boxing champion of the world, while Chisum became a local pugilistic legend in Dallas. Chisum also met others who would become lifelong friends, Emmett Scott and Isaac William Young. Little information exists on black schools or the children who attended them in the archives of Texas Methodist history.⁵⁴ Historical data does not inform specifically how and when these men met each other. However, they were all in the same network of the black Methodist West Texas Conference. In their professional careers, they admitted in letters to knowing each other from childhood. While Scott's and Young's families had means of support for their boys, Chisum and Johnson literally fought their way out of Texas.

White Methodists attempted to steer blacks away from incidents such as the guerilla warfare in Mexia, Texas. The Freedman's Aid Society set up during the Reconstruction was supposed to provide funds for Methodist ministers to aid in the development of youth through Methodist principles to become leaders in the

⁵³Ibid., 20. Richardson's name does not appear in other history books on Texas. At the end of his career he literally ran for his life because of his endeavors in trying to educate blacks.

⁵⁴ Walter Vernon, *Methodist Excitement in Texas: A History* (Dallas: Texas United Methodist Historical Society, 1984).

church, and to steer them away from civil disobedience; they were trained “to tolerate certain things for expediency.” Dr. Matthew Dugan, president of the historically black Wiley College in Tyler, Texas, explained that black Methodist “youth were trained to be discreet leaders and recognize certain things had to be tolerated as a means of expediency with the hope of gaining guaranteed rights in the end.”⁵⁵ Thus, in a sense, Chisum learned the principles and strategies of Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), an Italian Renaissance politician, historian, and philosopher, whose complex moral and ethical beliefs are perhaps best known, in the simplest of terms, by his statement “the end justifies the means.” He also cautioned, “All courses of action are risky, so prudence is not in avoiding danger (it’s impossible), but calculating risk and acting decisively.”⁵⁶ This language was linked to the ideal trickster narrative. Machiavellian principles could be likened to the slave survival philosophy: tell people what they need—do what must be done. They solidified the antics of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, and other characters in the stories of survival that children heard at the feet of their black mentors.

Using ideals of life’s fulfillment that Johann Pestolazzi taught, these black students were trained in the structure and method of operation to be politically active, to create higher education resources, to enable African American communities to overcome injustice and poverty, and to attain economic power. There were no repetitive memory games. Pestolazzi’s theories involved learning

⁵⁵ Warmoth T. Gibbs, *President Matthew W. Dugan of Wiley College: A Biography* (Marshall, TX: Firmin-Greer, 1936), 41.

⁵⁶ Nicollo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Luigi Ricci (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 71, 91.

through sense perception, the emphasis of ideas about things, and the use of moral powers in the process of education. His theory instilled themes of morality, thrift and industry, economic independence, and material success. The education left men wrestling with what it meant to have a life “fulfilled.” Black youth were indoctrinated with specific principles of how to fulfill their public and private lives. These were the principles Chisum struggled with most of his life. This dissertation will show that some he kept, while others he let ride.

Black youths also were taught the sacredness of life and the importance of the “use of one’s life as being as sacred as life itself.” Perhaps this sacredness resonated in Chisum, because his life had been used for his people since infancy. The philosophy underlying this emphasis made explicit that life’s fulfillment comes in the use made of one’s life.⁵⁷ Their education prepared them to enter colleges in theology, teacher training, medicine, dentistry, or law. Through his studies, Chisum became intrigued with a man of English history, the Duke of Warwick, Richard Neville (1428-1471) who served King Edward IV as a “man of affairs.” Somewhere, daydreaming, Chisum decided he also wanted to be a king maker like The Duke of Warwick whom he studied about in school. Chisum discovered that Neville was known as “Warwick the King Maker,” a title that came with large estates and helped to make him one of the most powerful men in England. Through Neville’s manipulations in 1461, Edward IV achieved the throne. Later, in 1470, Warwick helped the deposed Henry VI regain the throne. His significant political influence and willingness to change camps – or play both sides at the same time – in order to

⁵⁷ Ibid., 99.

maintain power made Warwick powerful English Lord. Neville was a master strategist negotiating for his nuclear family. A man of affairs took care of the king and exercised the power of the throne. The Methodist educational system somehow took the form of indoctrination to make Chisum not want to be the king, but the power behind a man of influence. Warwick, then, for blacks in politics is the same as “Uncle Tom” for black persons in society.

Probably the understanding that Chisum’s family needed him to help them get out of Mexia was always in his mind. According to the writings of most black historians on the black family, the Chisum family was different. In *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925*, Herbert Gutman surmised that the bondage of a past in slavery made black families shirk from separation of any kind for fear of never reuniting.⁵⁸ This calculation proved incorrect for the Chisum family. They deliberately sent their son first to gain an education and then to find them a place to settle. When the Methodist church reneged on promises of financial support for Rev. Richardson’s school, becoming educated took new twists.

For all the good intentions of the Methodist Freedman’s Aid society, Richardson did not receive the money as promised by the general church. Thus, students not only had to allow time for class instruction; they had to work for their education and for some send money home to support their families. Except for newspaper clippings about Chisum’s visits home, little remains to show how he survived. A short biography of Jack Johnson can be used to illustrate the lifestyle of

⁵⁸ Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 436-437.

the young black Methodist youths during their school years. It is clear, from the information both provided, that Johnson and Chisum grew up in the same streets in Texas. For boys such as Johnson and Chisum, the sojourn was not all schoolwork. In these years their experiences included working on the docks, breaking horses, gambling, and fighting with fists for money.⁵⁹

Boxing developed as a sport in eighteenth-century Regency England. It was a gentleman's sport, displaying self-defense that signified masculine honor and a less lethal form of dueling. For the most part in England, upper-class men sponsored working-class men to fight, betting on the outcome. The gambling aspect burdened the sport with fixed fights and corruption from the beginning. Though the sport of boxing was illegal in Texas, in the 1880s the boys earned hats full of money when they fought for spectators in the streets and pain when they fought for honor.⁶⁰

Jack Johnson (1878-1946) claimed he had "roaming instincts" while in school. His family, like Chisum's, included both parents. Henry and Tina Johnson were former slaves. Both were Methodists. Henry worked for the white school district as a caretaker of the school building. They had nine children; Jack was the second and the first son. He and Chisum, even with their six-year separation in age, ran around together and fought together in the streets of Galveston when they were lads. From descriptions in Johnson's autobiography and letters to Chisum, the

⁵⁹ Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson: In the Ring and Out* (Chicago: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927). The author attained this work by courtesy of Jameka B. Lewis, Guthrie, Oklahoma.

⁶⁰ Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890 -1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); *Freeman* (Indiana), 22 July 1899.

youngsters found a lot to do. Access to train yards yielded mobility, and usually, if they were sly enough, the boys hid in boxcars. Black Pullman porters who spotted them did not take their free travel lightly. They literally picked them up and used their feet to kick them off the trains. There were times when Johnson wound up with bruises and sore spots from his attempts.⁶¹ At age twelve Johnson traveled to New York on his own, using both trains and ships. There he found that working on the dock and gambling provided a source of income.

Melvin Chisum's indoctrination into fighting may have been much like Johnson's. Fighting in the streets proved lucrative. Hats would be "brimming" with money after their brutal battles. If so, then one way they learned to fight was by fisticuffs at the docks. This is Johnson's tale:

The men there were tough and hardboiled men. Fighting was one of the important functions of their existence. They fought upon every occasion and on any pretext. It was up to me to hold my own with them and I entered into their lives and occupations with as much energy as any of them. Although I was one of the youngest in this rough and aggressive group, I had to do my share of the fighting. It was necessary for me to fight youths much older and larger than myself. I suffered many beatings, but evidently as capable of standing much punishment. I won many of the rough and tumble battles, and because of the ill-matched affairs in which I engaged, I attained more or less a reputation as a fighter. It was at this time that I took up boxing, not with any intention of engaging in it as a profession, but because it seemed necessary for me to learn something of the science in order to pit myself against the fighting groups with whom I associated.⁶²

⁶¹ Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson: In the Ring and Out*. (Chicago: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927), 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 32.

Unlike Chisum, Johnson did not last in Freedman's Aid Society schools. Even as a child he observed the subtle change to white radicalism and ridiculed the shift in teaching that taught blacks to accept secondary roles instead of leadership roles. Johnson was expelled from Methodist schools for saying God did not exist and the church wanted to control people's minds. Later in life he wrote that he found people in the church more dishonest "in their conduct than all the care-free, thoughtless and irreverent spirits in the world of sport and questionable living." Johnson was proof of the success of the Methodist experiment in educating boys. With only a partial normal school education under his belt, Johnson could read books in three languages English, French, and Spanish. Like Chisum, his education was extensive. J. B. Lewis wrote that even though Johnson was expelled from grammar school he was "conversant with the works of Shakespeare, and can discuss and quote plays of the greatest of all English writers with an ease which reveals that he has delved deeply into his volumes." It amazed many that the Methodist experiment worked with black youth. Lewis stood astounded that Johnson was trained early in life in dignity. "The classics are quite to his liking and he not joys [enjoys] in hearing the finest compositions of the old masters, but he plays their composition himself."⁶³ Some force other than brutality would have to challenge a group of educated black men, with power and prowess, with the idea that they could succeed in America beside their brothers of the same human species but a different skin color.

The boys, Chisum and Johnson, also met others who would become life-long friends, Isaac William Young and Emmett Scott. When Johnson was approximately

⁶³ Ibid., 6.

fifteen, he started his heavyweight-fighting career. For a time he and Chisum traveled different pathways than the other friends. But as they moved around the country and the world throughout their lives, their careers would intermingle in Chisum's as he pursued his goals.

Like Chisum, Isaac William Young chose the same day to celebrate his birthday in January, 1872, but he grew up quite differently on a plantation in Glencoe, Louisiana. He was baptized into membership of the Methodist Episcopal Church (M.E.) at eight days old.⁶⁴ Young garnered one of the best educations a black could from the government's Freedman's Aid Society at Baldwin Academy, in Louisiana, which may have received money from the General Board of the Methodist Church.⁶⁵ In the 1900 census Young referenced his father's ancestry as French. Family legend and Baldwin accounting relate that Young's biological father, a shipper, paid for his education through donations to Baldwin Academy. While Chisum used his body in prizefighting in the mid 1890s, Young's biological father sent him on a world tour on his fleet of ships before he entered medical school. Young planned on teaching Latin. But with the outbreak of typhoid in Louisiana he chose to go into medicine. However, Young did have a father figure in the home by age four, after Joseph D. Brown married Young's mother, a beautiful Creole woman, Elizabeth Young he adopted Young. Through his stepfather Young was introduced to political life. After Reconstruction, the Democratic Party in Louisiana continued to use blacks, and Joseph Brown was appointed to his first term as magistrate over the

⁶⁴ H. T. S. Johnson "Life Sketch of Dr. Isaac William Young, President of Langston University," (*Oklahoma City OK*) *Black Dispatch*, 10 May 1923.

⁶⁵ Goodman, *Selections from a Journal*, 49.

third ward of Louisiana in 1881. Located in St. Mary's Parish, the area included the Franklin and the Saint Joseph districts. As the years passed, blacks gradually lost ground and were subjected to increased segregation and loss of political influence.⁶⁶ Yet Young developed a taste for the political life. It seems the transition of the Methodist experiment on black youth – from leaders to kingmakers – never reached Baldwin Academy. Young wanted to be a king, not a kingmaker.

Through the Methodist schools and meetings and traveling some of the same roads in Texas, Melvin Chisum met Emmett Scott (1873-1957), who would become a central politician in the emerging education and political movements for American blacks in the national arena in the first half of the twentieth century. The son of Horace and Emma Scott attended Methodist Freedman schools for a time. While his biographers emphasize the Wiley Normal School in his letters to colleagues, Scott admitted that he and Chisum were school lads together. In 1887-1888 Scott carried mail for the Marshall, Texas, post office to Wiley Normal School, a mile and a half away. He also held several positions for the school, including feeding hogs and chopping wood. According to legend, Scott shared his earnings with the other children in the family and eventually left school, so that other family members could attend. Scott began writing for the *Houston Daily Post* between 1891 and 1894, while Chisum was drawn into the life of pugilism, traveling on trains around the country, and getting a high school education. Scott also helped establish the *Houston Texas Freeman* newspaper and edited it from 1894 to 1897.

⁶⁶ Maurice Thompson, *The Story of Louisiana* (Boston: D. Lothrop Company, 1888), 264.

As the oldest son, in 1887 Melvin Chisum returned home from “education” to work and allow other members of his family to get an education. His four siblings were William Woodruff (1882), Samuel Sylvester (1883), Benjamin (1884), and Clarisse (1885). Like many blacks stuck in the heat of Texas racism and during the post-Reconstruction years, the family dreamed of moving North. Chisum also had a name change while he was away. He was no longer known just as little Melvin Chisum, but by a shortened version of his middle name, Jackson to “Jack Chisum.” He also had acquired a street-fighting name, “Texas Rosebud.”

The appearance of George Pullman (1831-1897) in Chisum’s life in the mid-1880s poses the question of whether Pullman hired Chisum entirely as a porter or also as a fighter. Pullman was an engineer and industrialist who designed and manufactured the luxury Pullman sleeping cars. He toured the South looking for a special kind of personality in young black boys to hire for his burgeoning businesses. Much like Chisum’s plight, Pullman had stopped his formal education at the age of fourteen and was about the same age as Chisum when he started supporting his own family. By 1853 Pullman helped move buildings away from the Erie Canal in order to widen the waterway. He later moved to Chicago and formed a partnership with Benjamin Field who operated sleeper cars on the Chicago Alton and Galena railroads. In 1880 he constructed a company town in the Calumet region of Chicago. His life, like Jack Chisum’s, was forged in the school of hard knocks.

Something in Chisum’s stature and character had given him a way out of Texas. Perhaps Pullman was drawn not only to young man’s personality, but also to

his size, leanness, and speed. Pullman also had his own fighting ring in the Chicago yards. According to sources and legend, Pullman personally talked to Chisum's family before hiring him as a railroad porter.⁶⁷

Did Pullman choose him because he could fight? Did Pullman use his porters as fighters to raise money or did he allow them to fight for their pleasure? Was Jack Chisum an exception? Did Pullman know that Chisum was a street fighter through the porters who kicked him off trains? There is no answer to any of these questions, but it is well documented that Chisum was clearly a Pullman man by the 1920s, especially in articles written about him in newspapers. Most books about Pullman porters address the intimate personal relationship between Chisum and Pullman after Pullman hired him as a porter, and particularly in Chisum's fight against unions in the 1920s.⁶⁸

Porters were personal servants to passengers on railway systems. They made their wages from tips. Pullman started his Pullman Porter Palace Company just after the Civil War. He established a standard for comfortable deluxe train travel. As a porter, Chisum worked directly with the customers: he received passengers, carried their luggage, attended to their rooms, served beverages and food, kept the guests happy, and made himself available to passengers at all hours. He also came into contact with powerful whites and influential blacks. Little is

⁶⁷ William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 15; Beth Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925 -1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁶⁸ Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 263-264.

written about the personal relationships between porters and their attendees, but a special relationship was forged between the rich men and their personal porters who saw indiscretions, looked the other way, and protected the reputations of their clients. As Chisum's public image grew in the early 1920s, these relationships would help him support Tuskegee Institute and other philanthropic endeavors. The Roosevelts, Vanderbilts, Fords, Morgans, Carnegies, Harrimans, Goulds, Fricks, and their families rode in luxury cars. A good porter and bodyguard was remembered for many years.

From Pullman Porter to Pugilist to Journalist

The Pullman Company also made it possible for porters to acquire an education by providing them with employment through the summer months.⁶⁹ The Harlan school of research records that Chisum attended the Boston School of Technology, the Chicago Theological Seminary, and took classes at Columbia University in journalism in New York City. He also trained in his vocation in the newspaper business as a day laborer. He engaged in another career that brought him fame across the country and around the world, as well as pain. He became an actor for Thomas Drury for his genteel needs, but also donned his tights, used his fists at first, and then gloves, to become a titled pugilist for income.

⁶⁹ William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37*, (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 53.

Though it was a dangerous sport, Chisum continued boxing because he was good at it and it carried with it both social and financial rewards—quick money and fame. Chisum made his debut as a boxer in the Dallas Opera House in Texas as “Texas Rosebud.” As brutal as his challengers, Chisum eventually boxed his way to a New York international title match.

During his school years Chisum fought in the alleyways, streets, and docks with other boys such as Jack Johnson, gaining not only an education but knowledge in the practice of pugilism. Some of his first fights took place on a sand bar in the Rio Grande.⁷⁰ Within five years of leaving Mexia, Chisum’s name appeared in newspapers in the states of Illinois, Texas, Ohio, New York, and Kansas as a pugilist or boxer of some merit.⁷¹ As Chisum began his fighting career during the late 1880s and early 1890s, boxing rules shifted from using bare knuckles to using gloves, and wrestling was omitted. Rounds were timed at three minutes. Regular rest periods were instituted, and a determined length of rounds was set instead of fighting until one of the two men could not continue. The idea of “ring generalship” was instituted for the best man with all-around fighting skills.

As “Texas Rosebud of Dallas,” Chisum took no mercy on his opponents nor they on him in the ring. “Texas Rosebud” was Texas steel, hard and unmerciful, attuned to making money by using his body. The boxing life was brutal for both

⁷⁰ Melvin Chisum, “Defends The South,” *Dallas Morning News* (Dallas, Texas) 13 August 1900.

⁷¹ *Inter Ocean* (Illinois) 13 August 1893, *Fort Worth Daily Gazette* (Texas), 4 July 1891, 5 July 1891, 2 July 1891. *Daily News*, (Texas) 2 July 1891, 8 July 1892, *Freeman* (Indiana), 24 October 1891. *Austin American Statesman* (Texas), 2 July 1891.

Chisum and his opponents. Some of the greatest boxers of all time came of age during the period. In 1891 there were no Jim Crow statutes in the ring. In July, 1891, the (colored) Texas Rosebud of Dallas beat the (white) Tommy Denton of Hot Springs in five rounds. The two men fought so hard and in earnest that Denton failed to respond when the fifth round was called. Texas Rosebud also went nineteen brutal rounds with Tony Hollis, only to have the match declared a draw. Most of Chisum's boxing matches were under Marquis of Queensbury rules for men weighing 135 pounds or less, and the winner took the purse of \$100 and 75 percent of the gate receipts.⁷² Most bouts took place in private fields or homes and were not covered by newspapers.

While Chisum used his fists and body to raise cash, continued his education, acted on stage, and worked in real estate in New City and New Jersey, his schoolmate and friend Emmett Scott continued his education at Wiley College in Tyler, Texas, edited a newspaper, and worked with a local politician in Houston. Isaac Young cruised around the world on his biological father's fleet of ships. As these men attempted to use their bodies and minds to find justice and fairness in the United States, they ran into situations they could not fight with gloves or with their wit.

Uncle Jim Crow, disguised as the states' laws this time, swooped down on Chisum and his colleagues. It did not matter how his name changed or to what part of the country he moved. Jim Crow laws slowly maneuvered their way into the

⁷² "The Colored Light-Weights," *Forth Worth Daily Gazette* (Texas) 5 July 1891.

boxing world. Vann Woodward talks about the Jim Crow laws as if they were an evil spirit enveloping America. The movement proceeded to dim the light of sports from declaring the best in sports in America racial superiority in America. Woodward wrote in his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, that “Its [theory of Jim Crow white supremacy], spirit is that of an all-absorbing autocracy of race, an animus of aggrandizement which makes, in the imagination of the white man, an absolute identification of the stronger race with the very being of the state.”⁷³ Like feudal laws, Jim Crow laws assigned blacks a fixed lower status in all things American.

The construct of whiteness caused the degeneration of blackness. It finally triumphed over the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments, even though the Methodist experiment proved that racial equality worked. The Reconstruction Era ended in late 1877. With the South backing congressional policy by 1895, a national trend of “Jim Crow” was set against the possible upward mobility of people of color. By 1877 the integral economic rationale behind the Civil War’s genesis is more apparent than simply a fight against slavery. The war was a fight over slavery, yes, but also a fight over the economic basis of slavery— land, labor, and capitalism. The end of Reconstruction opened new perspectives for lower socioeconomic groups of Anglo Americans, but only if some other group’s civil rights were constricted. The experiments of the Methodist church showed a recurring problem with blacks on the American stage. The slave past showed that black labor could indeed fulfill the needs of the American labor shortage. They could excel physically and mentally, but

⁷³ C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 108.

as Glenda Gilmore proves in her book, *Gender and Jim Crow*, blacks in the 1890s failed to find their “place” in society.⁷⁴ The same language of “place” in the mind of a killer got a child murdered for not saluting a passing rider as a “Nigger Killer.” The understanding of “place” had schoolboys pelted with dirt and kicked off of sidewalks in Dallas because they did not want to get their clothes dirty, and their “place” was now becoming law in America. However, the black historian, Brawley wrote that one of the tasks of Methodists’ school teaching was to break the understanding of “place” in society.⁷⁵

Jim Crow segregation gave the generation of Euro-American immigrants who were only then becoming included in American nativism, including Jewish refugees from Russian violence, a chance to make their mark on America without the competition of people of color. For example Jewish immigrants moved near Atlantic City and other areas, setting up farms and schools in villages as security networks for their race. However, Jewish people would convert into whiteness, leaving behind their enclaves for blacks such as Jack Chisum’s father to inhabit at the turn of the century. Blacks could never become white; only a few mulattoes would pass for white.

In a period of national economic depression, in the 1890s, the state governments slowly instituted Jim Crow codes to take away the rights of American blacks in sports, industry, and social areas. The years were malevolent and their

⁷⁴ Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁷⁵ Brawley. 2.

civil rights were always questionable. Young blacks of Chisum's generation faced a degeneration of their civil rights and the suffocating psychological blanket of the cult of whiteness. Then Frederick Douglass, the black reform leader, died, leaving them without a national leader in the midst of an outright push for persecution, pogrom, and slaughter. The Negro world needed hope. David Roediger's book, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, challenges older narratives on the growth of the ideology of white superiority in the United States.⁷⁶ The concept of racism in the form of "white superiority" for the historian does not wholly piggyback on European prejudices from prior centuries. The divisive, demonic concept took its shape from within the developing working class as they struggled with class identity.

Under conditions of an economic depression the country experienced a need for laborers. The rise of corporations and big business unwilling to support the working class with wages high enough to maintain a conventional standard of living, led to huge violent strikes. Under these circumstances, it seems the ruling class used racism to quell white labor unrest. The working class made their own choices and perpetuated the idea. They aligned themselves with the dominant ethnic group and abused people of color. As David Jackson suggests in *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle Against White Supremacy*, the working class perpetuated all the negative attributes ascribed to people of any African descent in a cult of whiteness or racial

⁷⁶ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

superiority in order to fit into the dominant white society.⁷⁷ The “cult of whiteness” was created to slow down or stop blacks from becoming successful.

In order to dampen labor competition, white laborers made black-skinned people “anti-citizens”—enemies of a social contract—in order to make themselves fit into a new white culture. To broaden Jackson’s point, laborers who took a whiteness mentality earned a kind of psychological compensation, even though they earned low wages; at least they had racial class privileges. They were not “black” but white. Therefore, whiteness mattered economically and socially. The idea of whiteness was not imposed on whites. The British did the same thing in India. Whiteness was linked to capitalism or an economic system: non-whites were automatically barred because they were unqualified to participate in the newly ordered society with a type of socioeconomic whiteness as the key element. In Oklahoma in order for blacks to receive their money from oil they needed white guardians to control the funds.⁷⁸ In *The First Black Boxing Champions*, Coleen Aycock supports this idea. She writes that the rise of black pugilists upset the white status quo because black prowess in the ring “directly challenged ideas of white supremacy.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Jackson, *Jackson In the Ring and Out*, 20-21.

⁷⁸ Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1940). *Oklahoma Foot-Loose and Fancy Free* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949). 104-105. Martin Hauan, *Oklahoma's Legla Graft, Illegal Graft and Just Plain Stealins* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: Midwest Political Publications, 1993). 75-95.

⁷⁹ Coleen Aycock and Mark Scott, *The First Black Boxing Champions: Essays on Fighters of the 1800s to the 1920s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), xiv.

Even with the changes in labor and with racism entering the boxing ring, Jack Chisum boxed his way to the top in one fight. Records are hard to locate, but the *Galveston Daily News* reported that by August 8, 1892, M. J. Chisum, known as “Texas Rosebud,” was hailed as the colored lightweight champion of the Southwest. Afterward he was inundated with challenges. The money rolled into his coffers. M. J. Chisum asserted that:

The challenge in yesterday’s news saying I would fight Tony Hollis if he would put up \$150 dollars was a mistake. If the Dallas amateur athletic club will hang up the purse of \$150 I will whip him for it. I have knocked him out once, as I can win no reputation by whipping him again I must have the cash or no chin. Texas Rosebud: the colored lightweight champion of the Southwest.⁸⁰

One hundred-fifty dollars in 1892 was worth \$2509 in 2018. Hollis responded with a \$100 purse; Rosebud’s choice was a side bet of \$50 or \$100. However, *The Wichita Beacon* reported in August, “The Rosebud of Texas” will never bloom in Wichita.” In a “rattling fight,” the Rosebud was heralded as a hard hitter, never whipped, and a stopper of champions. But even using the left jab Chisum was known for, he was knocked out in four rounds by Denver Jack. A swift right-hand swing to Chisum’s neck knocked him out for a full three minutes. After losing the fight with Denver Jack, Chisum’s next display was in Chicago’s Pullman’s City.⁸¹

Perhaps he went home to heal or rest. Or were he and other fighters called home to protect their godfather George Pullman? Pullman, like a plantation owner,

⁸⁰ “Sporting News: Rosebud and Hollis,” *Galveston Daily News* (Texas), 8 August 1892.

⁸¹ *Inter Ocean* (Illinois), 13 August 1893.

ran his city as if his workers were sharecroppers. Chisum was then his favored handy man. Depression loomed over the United States in the years of 1893-1894. Pullman systematically laid off workers and cut their wages. The American Railway Union led a strike that shut down Pullman City. The *Inter Ocean Newspaper* of Chicago on August 13, 1893, reported that John Holmes at 118 pounds and Texas Rosebud at 130 pounds were anxious to meet anybody at his weight to fight at Pullman City. It is interesting that the fighters were also gathering around George Pullman when his own utopian city was in an uproar and workers were preparing for a strike. On May 11, 1894, three thousand Pullman workers went on strike. Perhaps Chisum was a negotiator with his old buddies. The episode must have made an impression on him, as he became anti-union and would fight against A. Phillip Randolph in the 1920s and be against unionizing blacks.⁸² The boycott was broken in July by use of an injunction upheld by the U. S. Supreme Court. The relationship between Chisum and Pullman at that point is not well documented, but for the rest of his life Chisum honored and supported the entire Pullman family.⁸³

Like a bolt of spiritual lighting, Booker T. Washington's (BTW) call for African Americans to "cast their bucket" together as a brotherhood must have been like finding cold water in the midst of a hot summer day. Chisum, Emmett Scott, and I.W. Young attended the 1895 Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, and heard BTW deliver "The Atlanta Exposition Speech" encouraging blacks to "cast down your bucket where you are." Together they heard his call for accommodation. His speech

⁸² Eric Arnesen Harris, *Brotherhoods of Color: Black Railroad Workers and the Struggle for Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 91.

⁸³ Harris, *Keeping the Faith*, 54-55.

was in accord with the indoctrination of the Freedman Society schools, suggesting “toleration as a means of expediency with the hope of gaining guaranteed rights in the end and to gain economic power.” They followed him.

For many blacks who felt the American legal system was strangling them and holding them under water to drown, hearing the words of the Atlanta Exposition speech offered hope. And Chisum found that for the first time his dream had a chance of becoming reality. Blacks had a king. He could become a “Man of Affairs for the King of Black Americans.” Scott also was captured in BTW’s web. The young man from Houston had more to offer than just his skills as a newspaperman and his political work for Galveston labor leader Norris W. Cuney. Scott had a photographic memory. A loyal man with the ability to remember names and vast amounts of information was an asset to any leader. By 1897, Scott maneuvered his way into being BTW’s confidante, personal secretary, speechwriter, and ghostwriter. As Scott’s life changed, so did Chisum’s.

Texas Rosebud had earned his global boxing ID 546553 in 1897. He fought one fight under the world number in April of 1897 against Albert Griffith, a.k.a. “Black Griffo.” There was no soldier in Union blue to catch him. Young Griffo, a world-class pugilist from Australia, knocked out Jack Chisum in New York’s Arena Club boxing tournament in one minute and fifty seconds. Griffo would go on to be beaten by possibly the greatest lightweight or heavy lightweight champion, of the world of that time period, Joe Gans.

Several other blows would knock Jack Chisum into thinking about changing his life from the dangerous sport of boxing to educating his race and rearing a family. That year Chisum's backer, friend, and mentor George Pullman died at sixty-six years old. However, his links to the Pullman family would continue through his personal relationship with Pullman's daughter Florence (1868-1937) and both a political and personal relationship with her husband Frank Orren Lowden (1861-1943), who took over the Pullman empire. Lowden would later become governor of Illinois with Chisum's help. Chisum gave up the life of boxing for a position as assistant to Bishop William Derrick; he also became a newspaper writer, real estate developer, and hotel manager, and fulfilled the family responsibilities of son, brother, and husband.

In the winter of 1898, Chisum's brother William moved to New York with him. Subsequently, brothers Benjamin and Samuel followed. The brothers aided Chisum in the real estate business, as hotel clerks and doormen. In 1899, Chisum's father John very quietly sold his restaurant in Mexia, sailed out of Galveston harbor, and moved with his wife and daughter to New York.⁸⁴ John Chisum found work as a doorman in a New York hotel. However after he and Melvin were almost killed in a New York riot in September 1900, he moved away from the city and started a turkey farm in an old Jewish enclave.⁸⁵ Melvin Chisum settled down in an apartment with his wife, who came with his family from Mexia, and with apartment mates Paul and

⁸⁴ *Mexia Evening Ledger (Texas)*, 24 June 1899.

⁸⁵ See W. H. Brooks et al., "Story of the Riot," (New York: Citizens' Protective League, 1900), 16. When leaving work, a white mob chased Chisum's father in an attempt to kill him because a black man had killed police officer.

Alice Dunbar. Other than information garnered from *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others* and *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson*, little can be exposed on the Chisum-Dunbar episode.⁸⁶ As well, little is known about his wife. What is known is that by 1921 Chisum was divorced.

Jack Chisum gave up the name "Texas Rosebud" to claim his real name "Melvin J. Chisum." In 1900 Melvin Chisum wrote an expose on himself:

A few years ago, when exhibitions of the strenuous art of self-defense and fistic attacks were allowed under Texas law, there was a young Negro pugilist in Dallas known to ring fame as Rosebud. He made his debut in the ring in the Dallas Opera house. Pugilism being discouraged here, Rose Bud moved to New York, abandoned the ring for the more peaceful pursuit of managing a hotel and writing for the papers under his real name Melvin J. Chisum.⁸⁷

With this acknowledgment, M. J. Chisum's campaign to "defend the good people of the South, the country which from which I hail and which I love," shows his emergence into the newspaper field and what he later becomes as a cult hero for poor destitute blacks, Indians, and plain whites from 1914 until the 1930s. His journalistic career started when Chisum lashed out at the raging brutal wrath of Mississippi whites against blacks in July of 1899. Chisum lashed out at black newspapers that assumed that the lynching of Sam Hose in Georgia was justified. Challenging their conservative editorials and reports, he charged that they must stop making hasty conclusions and admit the real crime among blacks was conservatism, instead of defense. He wrote, "Conservatism is an excellent quality in

⁸⁶ Gloria Hull, *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1984), 120.

⁸⁷ Melvin Chisum, "The Special Need," *Freeman* (Indiana) 22 July 1899.

the abstract and there are certain spheres of activity in which we cannot well have too much of it. But this is not one of them." As an outsider in New York not connected to the Tuskegee machine but one who had felt the sting of terrorists in his home village of Mexia, Chisum pushed the press to take action to defend southern blacks living under the siege of hate crimes.⁸⁸

In his writing was a mounting frustration about the black press. He went one step further to admonish a man who would become friend and foe, T. Thomas Fortune. It seems Fortune blamed the southern race wars on the demeanor of the blacks living there, calling them "low elements" of the race. Chisum explained to Fortune, as have modern historians Jackson and Roediger, that "The common lumber of the white race, like that of our own, is so far in excess numerically that when their brutal wrath is raging they are unsafe, irresponsible, and uncontrollable citizens. It is an established fact that poor whites of the south, who own nothing and represent less, are our bitter enemies, regardless of how well behaved and progressive we may be."⁸⁹ Within the race, a socioeconomic divide among blacks becomes apparent in the rhetoric of newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century. The division takes place outside of the BTW network. Opening up this life of Melvin Chisum shows that he did not immediately go to BTW for work, but

⁸⁸ Melvin Chisum, "The Special Need: Among the Negroes-The Press and Its power to Surpress [*sic*], Atrocious Crimes of the South-viewed by Melvin J. Chisum of New York -Aliens-The Negro not on the List-Facts Plainly Stated," 22 July 1899; M.. J. Chisum, "T.T. Fortune Criticised," *New York Times* (1857-1922), 10 June 1900. Retrieved from <http://argo.library.okstate.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.argo.library.okstate.edu/docview/96003408?accountid=411>

⁸⁹ Chisum, "The Special Need," *Freeman* (Indiana), 22 July 1899.

attempted to start a school for blacks on his own in New York without the aid of the Tuskegee machine.

Sometime in 1900-1901, the Melvin J. Chisum Training School for Colored Servants opened for business at 414 West 36th Street in New York. Chisum and his family planned to train and find employment for black maids and manservants, mentor them, and watch over them as they entered private homes to work. He admitted in a letter that he was not a “missionary but doing the work in order to gain an honest income and elevate black people.” It was not successful.

As Chisum with the aid of his family tried to start his own school for colored servants, after BTW’s Atlanta Exposition speech, and after BTW’s acceptance by President Theodore Roosevelt as the leader of blacks, other movements in education took place. In March, 1897, W. E. B. Du Bois, Kelly Miller, Frank Grimke, John Cromwell, John Love, and Walter B. Hayson established the American Negro Academy in Washington D.C. This group of sophisticated educators attempted to foster black scholarly and cultural endeavors. Their stance was to move away from the emphasis on property development and pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps to more learned endeavors. The group was more in competition with Chisum than BTW. However, the death of Cromwell slowed their mission. Du Bois, who followed Cromwell, did not have the panache to lead the group. Not until Archibald Grimke rose to a leadership role in 1903 did the academy grow positively with its papers and sessions.

Many other great African Americans gathered in New York during this time, including Chisum's friends, James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson, co-authors in 1900 of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. The theater was filled with the leaders of New York's African American society for the performances. Chisum also befriended actors Bert Williams and George Walker. At the same time Chisum also continued a trade he learned at the Andrews Normal School through his work for the Composite Printing Company, a theatrical and commercial printing concern located at 121 West 40th Street in New York City's Theater District, remaining there a number of years as he added a journalism career to his repertoire. Chisum's world took him wherever the trains would run, from Dallas to Chicago to New York. From a boy his life was mobile. In the same period, another young journalist, who would later factor in Chisum's life, was making a name for himself in Chicago. Harold Ickes, an up-and-coming Republican politician, was a journalist like Chisum and worked for the *Chicago Record* and the *Chicago Tribune*.⁹⁰

After Chisum became quite well known across the country for his boxing feats, he also developed a reputation as bodyguard for Bishop W. B. Derrick, one of the most eminent men of the race and a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Derrick was born in Antigua, West Indies, in 1843. Derrick's style of preaching blended culture and faith in a union with modern mysticism. Derrick's background included heroism. During the Civil War, Derrick served in the U. S. Navy on the flagship *Minnesota* during the battle of the *Monitor* and *Merrimac*. According

⁹⁰ Harold Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1943) 27; John Maze and Graham White, *Harold Ickes of the New Deal: His Private Life and Public Career* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 32-34.

to the *AME Church Review*, Derrick was an inspiration to young people because he talked to the possibilities of his race and was uncompromising in his demands for freedom and justice.⁹¹ President William McKinley described his friend Derrick as one of the foremost citizens of the republic. He said to a black audience, "Your race has contributed to this country some of the best men within its confines and it will please you to know W. B. Derrick is one of them."⁹² Melvin Chisum bragged that he met every president from McKinley to Franklin D. Roosevelt. In a role such as bodyguard, his boasting seems legitimate. Chisum's relationship with Derrick and the death of George Pullman seemed to move him away from a life of using his body for survival and pushed him to move in different circles.

The lives of Chisum, Scott, Young, Twine, and Johnson reveal the background and nature of the black politicians who would forge the tide for civil rights in the 1930s. Through their lives historians can trace the trials that accommodation put before a generation of men seeking reform in an intolerant system that did not keep its promises to blacks. Their interconnected stories show how and why blacks began creating their own meter or plum line for their race to measure justice, equality, and morality to ultimately gain civil rights outside of the established American models. During the Progressive Era years from 1900 - 1917 they like others continued their search for recognition as Americans in their native land.

⁹¹ *AME Church Review*, October 1893.

⁹² *New York Times*, 30 May 1896.

CHAPTER IV

THE STROKE OF A PEN

THE VILLAINIZATION OF MELVIN CHISUM

If it ever seemed to Washington incongruous for himself, the conventional and conservative black leader, the Baptist layman, the public purveyor of conventional morality, to be in league with this plump little rogue in a bullet-proof vest who made his living by invading the privacy of others, he never committed such an attitude to writing. His resort to his humble servant Chisum is a measure of a certain moral insensitivity in Washington that one does not find in the private lives of his opponents such as DuBois or even Trotter. Those Harvard graduates started near the top. Washington, having started in slavery and poverty, would gag at almost nothing that promised dominance.¹

---Louis Harlan, *The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*

Louis Harlan created a Melvin Chisum caricature. He overdrew the muscles and did not insert the brain. Harlan did so – not so much to show who Chisum was – but to shore up or justify what he thought of Booker T. Washington (BTW). Several aspects of the real Melvin Chisum and his life need elucidation. The truth is that, in retrospect, if Harlan had not developed Chisum’s character as “Washington’s most

¹ Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 92.

active spy and eventually BTW's spy and provocateur, Chisum may have remained an unknown character in American history instead of heading the A-list for America's, and possibly the world's, top American black spies. Chisum's work in black espionage is now on flash cards and in the global classroom thanks to Dr. Quintard Taylor. Taylor is the Scott and Dorothy Bullitt Professor of American History at the University of Washington, Seattle. The black professor is also the website director of BlackPast.org, touting itself as "the Online Reference Guide to African American History." The website posts fifteen thousand pages on black history. Another online site, Textarchive.ru, offers Taylor's lectures on "Twentieth Century African American History" in a downloadable PDF format to be used by teachers around the globe. Fortunately, Taylor includes Chisum as "Washington's most active spy." Unfortunately, Taylor's online class lecture, "Washingtonian and Espionage and Accommodation," is based on Harlan's book, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee*. Harlan's conclusions are thus Taylor's conclusions. Taylor's conclusion for some in the world is the only knowledge they possess of Chisum and BTW's network of espionage. Because Chisum is established worldwide as a spy and an icon of black spy history, his legacy needs clarification and updating because currently through the distorted interpretation no one is able to see the real Chisum.

Though Harlan compared his use of the subtitle "The Wizard of Tuskegee" to contemporaries of BTW such as The Wizard of Oz, his metaphor goes beyond the Emerald city to Camelot. In the book, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, Harlan used metaphors such as "he had the uneasiness of every head that wears a crown"

associated with King Arthur.¹ Harlan attempted to use European world standards set by the Western Church for Saints and the medieval knights to judge people struggling for justice and survival in a world of white supremacy. Before Harlan's in-depth research in the 1960s most books about BTW were autobiographies.² Chisum's close associates wrote about him. Harlan's archetype for Chisum was that of the genie in the bottle – the spirit of accommodation. A genie was controlled.

In, *The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington*, Harlan suggests that no matter what he uncovered, BTW was still only a man. His point seemed to be that most historians wanted BTW to be a Sir Galahad who should have gained the Holy Grail for blacks. To the white world in the early twentieth century BTW was the perfect leader to regain the Holy Grail (as much as the white world would allow a black man to have a powerful vessel that healed sickness, renewed the land, and satisfied the wants of people who drank from it). For people investing in BTW's black leadership the idea of BTW being a Sir Galahad – a milquetoast kind of figure – had been ideal. The identity of Galahad was filled with accommodation metaphors. Galahad did what the King said. He went where the King sent. He always gave his life fully for the king. Those were the right standards for a subservient man but wrong standards for BTW and Chisum.

What Harlan found in the Booker T. Washington papers were black Machiavellians before whom even Brer Rabbit would have blushed. BTW was not Sir

¹Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*. Vii.

² Lyman Stowe Emmett Scott, *Booker T. Washington: Builder of a Civilization* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1918); Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Doubleday, 1901).

Galahad the knight. He was the Wizard, he was a Merlin superimposed over Arthur, a great leader and engineer of all the black peoples. Merlin could not be controlled. As BTW did not know his father; likewise, Merlin did not know his; legend had it that Merlin was sired by an incubus and a mortal woman. While there was no genie in King Arthur the legend is that wizards cast spells and directed genies. Harlan cast Chisum as BTW's genie.³ Well-behaved genies can only work magic when the master tells them to do so and only as the master tells. Perhaps using such metaphors Harlan subconsciously attempted to keep Chisum under control, in a lamp, instead of relating his entire life story.

Harlan understood that surviving Jim Crow took a different set of operating mechanisms in black culture but failed to establish them in his critique of BTW. He wore no mask. BTW represented the old black leader given little dignity in America history. Not only did Harlan discover BTW was Uncle Tom but most Uncle Toms were Wizards. BTW like Chisum should have been compared to Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, John Brown, American abolitionist, visionary and martyr, or Sojourner Truth abolitionist and women's rights leader. Comparing BTW and his lieutenants with European standards instead of attempting to place the group into their own arena, as did historians Shawn Alexander in *An Army of Lions* (2012) or David Jackson in *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle Against White Supremacy* (2008), does not work.⁴ Harlan used his own wand to cast

³ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*. 93.

⁴ Jackson, *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle Against White Supremacy: The Southern Educational Tours, 1908-1912*. Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania,

BTW and Chisum in Camelot. He showed that they struggled with an *other* worldly power that only a holy grail could rectify. Their struggle was discounted when the dignity of those who went through it consciously or subconsciously were perceived through a purely American Civil Religion lens. When the justice system allowed violence, injustice and evil to reign, new standards should have been set when writing about black leaders like BTW and Chisum. Black minority leaders employed different stratagems in achieving goals. They created their own realms by adding their own black social gospel; they changed American Civil Religion to an American Black Civil Religion (see chapter 2).⁵ Living there meant - being in a kind of inbetweeness – residing in a different realm than the mainstream United States culture.

Harlan saw this different stratagem of black American religious culture within Chisum’s character. It was not simple to understand. How did Harlan justify the action of a learned man, such as Chisum: an educator, spy, provocateur, journalist, a real estate entrepreneur, banker, who ran loose all over the Southern countryside, acting like a lowly Uncle Tom or fieldworker, who put his life at risk – freeing people tied to the economics of agriculture? Harlan’s unprocessed archival collections, which he used to write books and articles, are held at the Louis R. Harlan Papers, Special Collections University of Maryland Libraries. Unearthing those

2012.)

⁵ There is no one historical consensus on when the social gospel movement began or ended. For American Civil Religion see chapter 2 Bellah. See Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract: Or the Principles of Political Rights*, trans. Rose Harrington (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1893). Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (London: The Free Press, 1912).

papers discloses that while having well-researched information on Chisum, it seems that Harlan purposefully chose the strands of Chisum's background that clearly fit the life of a villainous spy. True enough, vilifying Chisum's character to fit Chisum's secondary career, as a spy was no major leap in interpretation. Chisum entrapped journalist Bruce Grit by using the newspaper, the *Impending Conflict* as a "strawman" for the Tuskegee Machine, and did odd spy jobs for Tuskegee until 1915.⁶ However, Harlan wrote in the *Wizard of Tuskegee* that "After 1906 Washington found less use for Chisum . . . and his spying for Washington ceased," and in "The Secret Life" that "after 1906 Chisum engaged in a succession of small business enterprises. ..." Harlan used metaphors from the world of wizardry when he continued, "Chisum remained, as he said, Washington's 'obedient, humble servant,' but the master no longer rubbed the lamp."⁷ This assessment steered the audience down the wrong road. For Harlan's and Taylor's students the rest of Chisum's legacy remains not only anticlimactic but also slightly deceitful. The truth was that Chisum worked for BTW right up to Washington's death. After BTW's death, Chisum, along with other lieutenants or social and political activists including Emmett Scott and Robert Russa Moton, continued the BTW legacy until their deaths.

⁶ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*; "The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington."; Cecelia Brooks, "Driving Black America: Melvin Jackson Chisum Kingmaker" (Oklahoma State University, 2014).

⁷ Harlan, *Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901-1915*, 93.

Wizards, Genies and Jim Crow: Harlan Redraws Chisum

What muscles did Harlan superimpose over the character and being of the original Melvin Chisum in order to develop the Chisum caricature? The exaggeration of Chisum's villainy included changes in his appearance, stature, and a change in name. Harlan also overdeveloped the relationship between Chisum and BTW during the period that Chisum spied for the Tuskegee Machine. Then to stigmatize Chisum as a spy and provocateur, Harlan attributed accessories and brashness Chisum used in his work as a government agent in the 1930s to develop Chisum's persona of "spy" in the early part of the twentieth century.

As referenced in the preface, Harlan manipulated his reader's minds by choosing the description of Chisum provided by G.W.A. Scott in an interview in 1968, instead of choosing to develop his character from the notes of his researcher(s) for the correct understanding era of the Booker T. Washington – Melvin Chisum relationship. Harlan chose to describe Chisum as "a man of no particular distinction" and "resembling an armadillo . . . short, stubby, ugly . . . with a big belly."⁸ Harlan had at least three choices in developing the physical stature of Chisum. In box 41 of the unprocessed Harlan collection, a file cited as "Chisum," one of Harlan's researchers presented a description of Chisum from a 1915 handbill. The person wrote "[sic] photograph of Melvin M. Chisum [sic] on a hand bill for a speech he was to give in Dallas, presumably, ((1915)) [sic] . . . he is a handsome, oval-faced

⁸ Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Volume 7, 1903-4* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 219. Hereafter cited as *BTWP*.

Negro of young middle age, billed as of Baltimore and pres (sic) of the national Negro Prss Asso (sic)."⁹ Harlan also had a description from Wendell Phillips Dabney's book *Chisum's Pilgrimage* (1927). Chisum was "clad in southern attire, five feet six inches in height, superabundant tissue un-corseted, complexion decidedly brunette, and hair true to nature . . . white flannel pants and coat, white silk shirt, soft collar, flowing tie, large Panama hat sombrero style. [He] was an imposing personality. ... Everyone with "whom Chisum came in contact with rendered [him] homage."¹⁰ The third description came from the oral history interview done in 1968 by a man who admitted he did not like Chisum. Of the three descriptions Harlan chose the more villainous one to develop his interpretation; he did so to play off the idea of Washington's "moral insensitivity" in the paragraph that revealed moral depravity in BTW. Using the language of a known antagonist, then revising the quote as a "plump little rogue in a bullet proof vest who made his living by invading the privacy of others" in *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, is artistry, but the description gives the writing flavor and attests to Chisum's and BTW's villainy. However, the description is not only anachronistic, it is false evidence. Deconstructing this analysis brings other interpretations of Harlan's under question. Did he have a problem with people who started in slavery and poverty?

⁹ Harlan Papers, Box 41, UMD Libraries.

¹⁰ Wendell Phillips Dabney, "A Visit to Dunbar's Tomb," in *Negro Caravan*, ed. Sterling Allen Brown, Arthur Paul Davis, Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden Press, 1941). Dabney's *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others* (1927), noted in Harlan, *Wizard of Tuskegee*, 81-94.

With no source cited for his research, Harlan wrote that in 1900 Chisum was a “plump, possum shaped young Texan.”¹¹ Washington died in 1915 when Chisum was a youthful looking man or at most a suave middle-aged one. The description by Harlan’s researcher seems the most accurate of the three. The Harlan collection includes the full oral interview with Scott on November 7, 1968 by one of Harlan’s students, historian Pete Daniel.¹² In the interview Daniel seemed to hint at what values he needed. Remembering Chisum as a sort of “secret service man,” the elderly, Tuskegean, G.W.A. Scott, under the scope of the white interviewer, admitted that there were “no data” behind his description. Yet, when led on by the interviewer using the question, “Describe Chisum. Dr. Louis R. Harlan wrote a paper and mentioned that Chisum looked like a ‘possum.’ Do you agree?” The interviewer pushed Scott with the question of “How big was Chisum? About the size of Jackie Gleason?” Consequently, Scott recanted the size issue with, “No not that big. He might have weighed as much as 225 pounds and was about 5’6 or 5’7.” Neither Harlan nor his students attributed the prejudice in articles or books. According to the transcript of the interview, Scott paused to speak to his wife before he talked to the interviewer about Chisum. Then Scott prefaced his description with the words “Yes, I knew Chisum. But anything I say about him will be prejudiced.” In his memory, he dubbed Chisum “like an Armadillo” because of his bulletproof vest,

¹¹ Harlan, “The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington.” 405.

¹² Sundiata Djata, *Blacks at the Net: Black Achievement in the History of Tennis*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006) 7. Djata describes Scott as a tennis coach at Tuskegee.

adding, "He was short, stubby, and ugly. He had a big belly."¹³ During the interview Scott alleged that Chisum carried a pistol all the time.¹⁴

Chisum carried a gun when he worked for the United States Government. When Chisum met Scott in the Tuskegee University parking lot in the mid-1930s, those years were the zenith of Chisum's career and power in the Democratic Party. At that point Chisum was the only black man working for the Public Works Administration (PWA) for the New Deal Administration as an investigator for Secretary of the Interior. The PWA was created as a part of the National Industrial Recovery Act in June 1933 as a response to the Great Depression. In his own sphere as a government agent, Chisum was as powerful a figure in his specialty as Oscar De Priest was in politics. Chisum had power and prestige over people that needed him to pass their claims through the PWA in order to procure government payout for their projects. He made an equal salary to whites in the same position. He was used to suppress problems in the black world of the United States. He essentially was the top black spy, detective, or investigator in the country.¹⁵

Because of this change in party affiliation, he became the a powerful American Black in politics. In the 1930s Harold Le Clair Ickes, as Secretary of the Interior, wrote in his original diary notes, found at the Library of Congress, that

¹³ Harlan Papers, Box 43, envelope, UMD Libraries.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Harold Ickes, "Diary," in *Harold L. Ickes Papers*, ed. Manuscript Division Library of Congress (Washington D. C.: Library of Congress, 1937), Box 29. On March 15, 1937 Ickes sent Chisum to clear the way for black Judge William Hastie's appointment. References to Chisum have been taken out of Ickes autobiography and books. See the same date in Harold Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1943).

Chisum was one of his investigators. He named and described Chisum as “a clever Negro” who knew his way in working with black people. Ickes described dispatching Chisum to get lawyer, William Hastie, appointed as the first black to Federal District Court in the Virgin Islands. Ickes wrote several other positive comments about the work Chisum did for him.¹⁶

G.W.A. Scott told his interviewer this story. Scott was washing his car at Tuskegee and somehow got water on Chisum’s car by mistake. He also splattered Chisum’s shoes. For both Dr. Chisum and his father, shoes were somewhat sacred. Chisum and Scott had words. Scott described Chisum as getting into “a wild bull dog rage.” Then Chisum pulled his gun on him. Scott threatened to throw a pail of water on Chisum. The matter rested. When Scott complained to Robert Russa Moton, principal of Tuskegee University, “Dr. Moton took up for him [Chisum], and told me how much Chisum had done for the school and how valuable he was to the school. ... On this visit to Dr. Moton he was, as he had been ever since our first meeting, very fatherly in his attitude. He gave no indication whatever of hostility toward me for what I had done.”¹⁷ Harlan used Scott’s depiction of Chisum in his writings.

Chisum’s son did not deny that his father carried a gun with him in the 1930s when he worked for the PWA. Nor did he claim his father could not be mean. Melvin Chisum, Sr., himself said, “Through all the years of my public experience, I have never once failed a friend. Have always striven arduously to serve disappointment and misery to my enemies without compunction, but friendship with me is a sacred

¹⁶ Ickes, “Diary,” Box 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., Harlan Papers, Box 41, Chisum file, UMD Libraries.

relation and I treasure it as a gift from God.”¹⁸ Reading the biographies of blacks by black authors this idea of serving disappointment on enemies is not new to Chisum. Several American black leaders, including William Chase, felt the same way.¹⁹ There were times when they had to be mean in order to get their work done (chapter 7).

Had Harlan done an oral interview with Chisum’s son it is possible he would have gotten a better portrayal and timeline to judge Melvin Chisum Sr. Though Harlan knew of Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., because of the article in the *Negro Bulletin*, within the collection, no correspondence was conducted with a living relative of Chisum. Chisum described his father with alacrity. “I was always amazed by the similarity in the physiques and physical movements of my father and the Hollywood actor, Edward G. Robinson. Dad was dignity and suavity personified. He had the appearance, the approach of the techniques of a diplomat.”²⁰ Melvin Chisum Sr.’s picture appeared on the front page of the *Minneapolis Messenger* in 1922, the *Washington Eagle* in 1927, and the *Louisville Leader* in 1928. However, when and if Chisum wore a suit with a gun, he probably acted differently around Tuskegee than in the professional realms of his job.

According to his son, Chisum carried a gun and wore a vest. Many of his pictures from youth to adulthood have him dressed in suit and vest. His dangerous occupation caused him to carry a pistol with him when he traveled. In the 1930s

¹⁸ Melvin Chisum to Isaac William Young, 6 September 1933, Leonelle Young Hargrove Collection, Oklahoma City University. Hereafter cited as OKCU.

¹⁹ In Richardson, *National Cyclopedia*, see William Calvin Chase, P.B.S. Pinchback, Toussaint L’Ouverture, and others.

²⁰ Dr. Melvin Chisum to Author, April 13, 2007. OKCU.

Chisum's work took him to the South by auto and by train. "Then the South was a more dangerous place for black people than it is today. I was accustomed to seeing it (the gun) in his suitcase," Dr. Chisum wrote, "I cannot recall his ever having told me that he had occasion to use it, but he recalled one occasion that they talked about the gun:

Some of the projects on which he worked as Resident Engineer Inspector when he was employed by the Public Works Administration, took him to the deep South. He described an episode when he was working in Alabama, maybe on the Mussel Shoals Dam. It was his job to be certain that the material and specifications required in the specifications for these government works were being met. This, of course, did not always sit well with the contractors who were local people and sometimes inclined to cut corners in order to increase their profit on a job. What is more, they were unaccustomed to a black man in authority in the first place. Dad heard "by the grapevine" that the white folks had decided to ride him out of town on a rail the next day. So early that morning, he went to the shop of the local gunsmith, told him he wanted to buy a pistol and indicated the one in the showcase that he wished to purchase. The shopkeeper asked him if he had a license to carry a gun. The old man threw his government credentials on the counter and told him, "There is my license." The shopkeeper sold him the gun and Dad left the shop. Of course, he had his own pistol with him, but he wanted the town's people to know he was armed. He knew that the shopkeeper would inform them of the purchase. He never heard any more about the attempts to run him out of that town. He had several similar stories. That is the kind of life he led. It was dangerous and he believed in being prepared.²¹

However, as a medical doctor, the late Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, had a strong understanding of his father's character and build. He proved to be a useful resource. During the period that Chisum knew BTW he was in

²¹ Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 23 June 2005. Held in author's notebook.

his late twenties and early thirties. Chisum's appearance suggests a moderate height, clean-shaven, successful black businessman with piercing eyes.²² As he aged he became stouter. When Dr. Chisum was born his father was 49 years old. "I remember him being about five feet eight inches in height and weighing between 210 and 215 pounds," his son described. "He was more muscular than fat--what we as physicians, would call a meso-endomorph." He was stocky. To look at his pictures with Jackie Gleason in mind, he and Chisum had similar dimensions in the 1930s but Scott never admitted that idea to Daniel.

Dr. Chisum's description explains what journalist and author Wendell Phillips Dabney wrote in a short story. Dabney, editor of the *Union* newspaper, wrote that Chisum was in fine shape "financially and physically" in his 1927 publication of *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others*.²³ Dabney only published one hundred copies and gave signed copies to friends. In the story Chisum took Dabney out for the day. Arriving in a limousine with money to spend, Chisum enticed Dabney to ride with him to the gravesite of Chisum's deceased roommate Paul Laurence Dunbar. The adventure is comical. Chisum alienates Dunbar's mother and is practically thrown out of her house; but without a glimmer of remorse, he continues the journey.

Two definite descriptions of Chisum with a gun are given by an enemy and then by Chisum's son. However, the description by the researcher who looked up a

²² *Missouri Messenger* (Kansas City), 14 January 1922.

²³ This dissertation is named *Chisum's Pilgrimage II* in response to the original book. Wendell Phillips Dabney, *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others* (Cincinnati: Self Published, 1927).

picture for Harlan of Chisum in 1915 is the closest to how Chisum would have looked during the time of the Tuskegee Machine. It is possible that Harlan set the stage for his villainous portrayal by finding someone who knew the villainous side of Chisum. However, the answer to how Chisum looked during the period he worked with Washington (1903-1915) is clearly that he looked like a young gentleman of upward mobility. Possibly the articles that circulated about Chisum being chased out of Oklahoma with a charge of libel prompted the need for having Chisum look villainous. Whatever the cause, looking at research from Harlan's own files shows that Harlan chose the villainous approach over the real Chisum.

Harlan's description regarding the episodes BTW used Chisum to against Bruce Grit and the Niagara Movement need revision. During his early period (1895-1900) Chisum was not just a pawn of the Tuskegee Machine. The machine did not really form until the early 1900s when Emmett Scott joined the team. During the period of the late nineteenth and early in the twentieth century Chisum attempted to develop himself into a reformer and a businessman in his own right. He tried to start a school for servants at the same time in New York that W.E.B DuBois and others sought to develop a school for the talented tenth in Washington D.C. The school had nothing to do with Tuskegee. Acting on his own, Chisum attempted to foster a vocational training school for blacks. It was an effort to make money. He did not want to be regarded as a "missionary."²⁴ Neither man fulfilled their dreams with their schools. However, Emmett Scott, Chisum, and W.E.B. DuBois all ultimately

²⁴ Melvin J. Chisum to Madam, 18 March 1901, Harlan Papers, Box 40, UMD Libraries.

formed relationships with BTW. DuBois formed his relationship on an academic and professional level, while Chisum struggled to get BTW's attention through his childhood friend Emmett Scott (chapter 5).

As Harlan documented, during the last few years of the nineteenth century, Chisum's childhood friend Emmett Scott developed a place within the Booker T. Washington administration at Tuskegee Institute. Together both BTW and Scott developed the Tuskegee Machine. The genesis of the Tuskegee Machine began with Scott who brought his training from Houston, Texas, to Tuskegee, Alabama, as Washington's special assistant. Among other jobs until 1897, Emmett Scott, Chisum's childhood Methodist friend, worked under Norris Wright Cuney (1846-1898), a powerful Republican Party black leader in Houston, Texas. The Tuskegee Machine was partially patterned after the Cuney political machine. The likelihood that Chisum worked under Scott in Houston is very possible considering the times Chisum was home in Texas.

Philip Minor Cuney owned Norris Cuney's mother during slavery; Norris was his son. Philip educated his son as English Lords educated their natural children. Though born a slave in Texas, Norris Cuney was emancipated by his father at thirteen years of age and received a preparatory education at Wylie Street School for blacks in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Cuney returned to Texas and through his white family's connections became one of the most powerful blacks of his time. Governor Edmund J. Davis of the Radical Republican Reconstruction Party in Texas supported Cuney. In the Houston area Cuney literally controlled the vote of black

people. Through party alliances and the study of law, Cuney became a black boss. He became president of the Galveston Union League chapter and later served as the Republican Party's national committeeman from Texas. In 1883, he won the position of alderman in Galveston and founded the Negro Screwman's Benevolent Association, a collective bargaining association for African American longshoremen who worked the docks.²⁵ Somehow, Scott became his personal assistant. Chisum sometimes worked the docks along with his friend Jack Johnson. Possibly he knew Cuney and he definitely knew Scott. Cuney, Scott, and Chisum participated in some of the same fraternal organizations, Prince Hall Masons in Texas, Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, and the Methodist Church.²⁶

Emmett Scott, a brilliant young man by any standards, recognized that he would need another position in 1897 when Cuney lay ill and dying. Scott, resourceful like Richard Neville the King-Maker (1428-1471) plotted his next move. He invited BTW, the rising leader of American blacks, to speak at a hall in Houston, Texas. Scott showed Washington his work up close, how he supported Cuney, and how he could support BTW, and make him a "king." Scott had a photographic memory. While correct in his description of Scott as "a small, rather delicate-looking yellow man with a pince-nez" Harlan's statement that Scott held out for two weeks

²⁵ Maud Cuney Hare, *Norris Wright Cuney: A Tribune of the Black People* (New York: Crisis, 1913); Virginia Neal Hinze, "Norris Wright Cuney," Master's Thesis, Rice University, 1965; Paul Douglas Casdorff, "Norris Wright Cuney and Texas Republican Politics, 1883-1896," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (April 1965): 455-6; Ernest Obadele-Starks, *Black Unionism in the Industrial South*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000); Douglas Hale, *A Southern Family in White and Black: The Cuneys of Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003).

²⁶ John and Ethelyn M. Collection, MA 8:3-5 Box 2 folder 1.

is deceiving in this critical two-page narrative of history.²⁷ Yes, Scott saw the coming of a new star when he brought Washington to his own arena in Houston, Texas. Washington, observing and acknowledging what Scott could do for him, knowing Scott's Methodist passion to be "a moon rather than a star," or a kingmaker, wooed the 24-year-old Scott through his letters.

In order to gain as a secretary one of the most brilliant black politicians in the country, BTW in 1897 had to meet Scott's terms. Scott needed to finish the business left in his hands by Cuney. Scott destroyed much of his own manuscript collection; a few manuscripts left by his family were deposited in Morgan State University. When he was a boy, Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., remembered taking letters to the mailbox from his father to Scott almost daily. However, not one letter remains in Scott's manuscripts. Scott probably did the destruction himself as he was taught to do so by Cuney. In the meantime, with few resources at his hands, BTW also had to offer a decent salary to one such as Scott the "kingmaker."²⁸ After they negotiated Scott's salary, the result was a trained American black Progressive Era team that developed political power in the deep South. The Tuskegee Machine began with Emmett Scott and BTW and methods instilled in leaders over hundreds of years by Machiavelli, Brer Rabbit wit, and Cuney's training.

Perhaps Chisum carried out missions with Scott under the Cuney regime. No information exists to verify this assertion. Scott admitted that he and Chisum

²⁷ Harlan Louis, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). 261.

²⁸ Emmett Scott to BTW, 2 July, 6 August, and 4 September 1897, Harlan Papers, Box 41, UMD Libraries.

remained friends from childhood. The possibility remains likely. However, in 1897 while Scott remained busy building the Tuskegee Machine, Chisum remade himself into a freelance newspaper writer, assistant to Bishop William Derrick, and went into the professional boxing ring for the last time.

Even though Melvin Chisum understood himself as Texas Steel, after a period of time the brutal punishment of the body led him to change his outside appearance even as his inside became more jaded. While being the pugilist earned him fame and income in the earlier part of his career, Texas Rosebud realized on April 19, 1897, that there were tougher, more aggressive pugilists. The *Pittsburg Press* clearly reported that such was the case on Rosebud's first and last day in the professional boxing ring when he fought an Australian. Rosebud was out of his league when compared to world-class pugilists. Or maybe he had enough of the "strenuous life of self-defense." Perhaps in a revelatory moment like Harriett Tubman's, after being hit hard, he made a decision. During one minute and fifty seconds in the ring of "alleged" fighting, Rosebud caught the fatal blow of his boxing career between his shoulder blades. Rosebud stopped his "blind" galloping around the ring and sank down. Not unconscious, "still in possession of his senses, the Rosebud refused to get up inside the time limit and Griffo received the decision."²⁹ He put aside the vocation of boxing for education in law and printing and "the more peaceful pursuit" of managing a hotel and writing for the papers under his real name Melvin J. Chisum. Out of the ring he worked as a nexus, a man of affairs, determined to make it in the business arena with his muscle, Machiavellian technique, and education. Chisum

²⁹ *Pittsburg Press* (Pennsylvania), 19 April 1897.

attempted to pattern his work like older men from BTW's generation—journalists William Bruce and T. Thomas Fortune. Chisum had fight left in him and he chose to fight for rights not only against the white supremacy but against blacks intellectuals who cared little about grass roots black people. He studied in freedmen's schools and theatre; now he chose to work in the fourth estate to contend against the gentrified black culture of the United States – that was – to gather southern grassroots people to dispute the cultural aspirations of established blacks. However, he always remained open to missions for cash.

Chisum never moved back to Texas. In the last decade of the nineteenth – century, New York was his primary headquarters. In 1898 his brother William joined him; by 1900 his whole family left Mexia under cover of darkness. When his father, mother, and sister came they also brought his wife from Texas. There are no indicators as to when, where, and how Chisum met his first wife Mae Johnson or married her. However, research shows that Chisum and his first wife Mae shared an apartment with friends Alice and Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Mae was educated in the trade of cosmetology. In his leisure time, Chisum acted with the Theodore Drury Company, an mixed race acting company, playing several parts including Othello. Without the lucrative career of boxing supplying his needs, Chisum engaged in other commercial and industrial business affairs. His family depended on him for finances, security, and guidance in New York. He and his brother William studied law and rented apartments, and managed a hotel. Chisum allegedly managed a black theatre company. He wrote for the *Colored American* newspaper's "Greater New York Gossip Column." Chisum tried to find his place in the generation of those who had been

slaves and were then free. Like W. E.B. DuBois to BTW, as crabs in a basket, many of the black leaders fought for recognition and were willing to pull each other down to gain it. Through Scott, Chisum sought his way into the most powerful black community in the country by being whoever or whatever BTW needed him to be. BTW needed a spy.

Chisum The Entrepreneur

The Tuskegee Machine needed Chisum to be a provocateur against journalist John Edward Bruce “Bruce Grit” (1856-1924). Bruce was a former slave who through connection with Missouri Senator Thomas Benton gained a career in journalism as a messenger for the associate editor of the *New York Times*. In 1884 his pen name became Bruce Grit.³⁰ He and Chisum had an antagonistic relationship as early as 1898. Grit brought Chisum’s management of William Barker, an actor from Port au Prince, Haiti, under suspicion. Chisum advertised that Barker was an actor from the Port au Prince Theatre, had been trained in the Academe of Haiti, and was supported by a black company under the management of Chisum. Even though Barker received a standing ovation and encores for his presentation, Bruce Grit revealed to the world that there was no Port au Prince Theatre and no Academe of Haiti. Barker’s background was fraudulent and Chisum made up the lie. On the front

³⁰ Ralph L. Crowder, *John Edward Bruce: Politician, Journalist, and Self-Trained Historian of the African Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); William Seraile, *Bruce Grit: The Black Nationalist Writings of John Edward Bruce* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003.)

page of *The Colored American* on April 16, 1898, Bruce Grit charged Chisum with going too far by creating a “fictitious reputation” for Barker.³¹ Chisum made no response. He continued moving around the country, still a pugilistic celebrity for his community in Texas, but he now had an antagonist outside of the ring.

Chisum found his niche in the newspaper world by responding as an antagonist to articles written by black men about the crisis in the South. He strove to steadily develop a niche, centering on the ethos of being a “Negro” from the South concerned about protecting his people and their relationship with whites. Not unlike Grit who uncloaked Chisum’s antics before all New York, Chisum attacked journalist T. Thomas Fortune (1856-1928) for his lack of understanding about the relationship between grass-root blacks and plain whites. Chisum probably had no idea he had stepped out against one of BTW’s most intimate friends. He perhaps knew Fortune also co-founded the more radical, sometimes militant, National Afro-American Council in 1898.³² Bishop Derrick held shares in the newspaper Fortune edited. On June 4, 1900, as blacks gathered to celebrate the anniversary of John Brown’s Raid, Fortune’s speech startled some in the audience that included Chisum when he called for retaliation against the South for their attacks on Negroes. Chisum wrote that the light-skinned, firebrand Fortune lectured, “You must organize and keep your powder dry and be ready to demand an eye for an eye, a foot for a foot;

³¹ *Colored American* (Washington, D.C.), 16 April 1898.

³² Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

there is coming a great crisis for the Negro in this country in which much blood may be shed.”³³

Fortune edited three newspapers—the *New York Globe* (that later became the *New York Freeman*), and the *New York Age*. Fortune’s political and journalistic career landed him on both major sides of the reform movement. Up to last the decade of the nineteenth century he was a proponent of integration. However, during the same period, like other blacks as “enemies of the same enemies,” he worked closely with BTW and W.E.B DuBois.³⁴ His work pointed to Malcolm X of the twentieth century. At his most extreme, Fortune called for American blacks to fight back against their white enemies. Chisum reported in a letter to the *New York Times* that Fortune said:

There is but one way to put a period to the force and violence of a Bourbon – use more force and violence than he uses. As he believes in brute force, he respects it, even when it is used by those he hates and stabs in the dark. ... Let the colored man stand his ground. There is far more honor in dying like a free man than living like a slave.³⁵

³³ *New York Times* (New York), 4 June 1900.

³⁴ See August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963). Emma Lou Thornbrough, *T. Thomas Fortune: Militant Journalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Alexander Shawn, *T. Thomas Fortune the Afro American Agitator: A Collection of Writings, 1880-1928* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2008).

³⁵ *New York Globe* (New York), 10 November 1883. The first estate was the clergy (prayer), the second estate the nobility (fighters), the third estate commoners (workers). The term fourth estate was coined in 1837 to show the increasing power of the press.

In one article, *The Virtue of Agitation*, he wrote, “We believe in dissatisfaction; we believe in the manifold virtues of agitation.”³⁶ Harlan called the phenomena the “divided mind of the race.”³⁷ Whether Chisum wrote at the insistence of Bishop Derrick, or on his own, Chisum responded to Fortune’s speech both on June 4 and June 10 in the *New York Times*. Chisum claimed that Fortune gave a “firebrand speech” which could hurt Southern blacks. He reproved Fortune by saying that Fortune needed to move to the house of conservatism and “keep quiet” because Fortune’s words as “Big Nigger foolishness” hurt grassroots blacks.³⁸ Chisum developed an anti-revolt agenda as a powerful black man from the South. He wrote, “We know that Fortune is a man of large experience. He has made great efforts in various ways, but in it is history of that gentleman’s own make that almost everything that he has been left to run has turned a failure, not for lack of earnest prosecution but use of bad judgment instead [sic].”³⁹ In a conservative effort Chisum attempted to quell the storm of anxiety in white southerners in the Dallas area about an uprising of blacks against them. Chisum wrote, “Mr. Fortune[,] riot and pillage are not at all feasible.” He explained that it was not the depravity of blacks that had whites turning on them but “poor whites are enemies of blacks in the south regardless of how well behaved and progressive blacks might be.”⁴⁰ Chisum’s article in the *Freeman* newspaper called for “Special Need” in regards to the Sam Hose

³⁶ *New York Globe* (New York), 18 August 1883.

³⁷ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915.*, 39.

³⁸ *New York Times* (New York), 10 June 1900.

³⁹ *Dallas Morning News* (Texas), 13 August 1900. The wording is as written.

⁴⁰ *New York Times* (New York), 10 June 1900.

murder.⁴¹ An Anglo-American mob including men, women, and children in Palmetto, Georgia, had burned Hose alive for allegedly killing and raping his boss and wife, charges that were never proven. The white crowd cheered, cut Hose's body into pieces, and sold them as souvenirs within their community.

Three months later Chisum charged that all the black newspapers assumed Hose's guilt instead of looking for the truth. There "was not a single doubt expressed in any of the papers which I read as to Hose's guilt or outrage, not even to the point of using the term 'alleged outrage,' but it seems to me that the colored paper took it for granted that Hose was guilty of all that was charged against him and were only sorry that he did not get a trial by a lawful court. Whatever else they may mean this is the general census [sic] of opinion formed of their conservative editorials and reports." Chisum asked for investigations into reports on black crime in the newspapers. He wrote that "Conservatism is an excellent quality in the abstract and there are certain spheres of activity in which we cannot well have too much of it. But this is not one."⁴² Chisum's identity at the turn of the twentieth century was that of bodyguard for Bishop William Derrick, conservative journalist, real estate man, holding appetites for the arts including the sport, theatre, and music but known only to Scott as a spy.

Correspondence between Chisum and BTW in the *Booker T. Washington Papers* revealed that Chisum, much like other young men of the time period, was

⁴¹ *Freeman* (Indianapolis), 22 July 1899.

⁴² *Ibid.*

captivated by BTW's philosophies of interracial peace and economic opportunity to the point of hero worship.⁴³

The term Bookerite was a play on BTW's first name. Chisum's philosophy of work-based upon Christian principles of economic opportunities for blacks—was refined by Bookerite principles. Church affiliation was fluid. There was one Lord, one faith on baptism. Most leaders like Chisum moved from denomination to denomination with little problem. He held no allegiance. Church denomination was treated as a business. He found work from time to time in churches checking credentials for pastors that were called to the pulpit. The overarching ideals of American Black Civil Religion centered on who the enemy was for all blacks. Their enemy was the same. BTW's philosophy of reform was grass roots- bottom up- not top down- Machiavellianism—"fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee." Tell them what they need to hear and form an underground network to care for the dispossessed using their patronage. While on the surface it seemed that BTW advocated accommodation on the part of African Americans to Anglo Americans in the United States, his work fit into the paradigm of black civil religion and the social gospel movement. To the world his paradigm of reform included a rationale that blacks should avoid politics to pursue a program of education, business, and self-reliance, but under the cover of education he supported political and social reform. BTW's idea was that black economic self-improvement would lead to social elevation. He believed that economic market forces would eventually undermine discrimination

⁴³ Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 6-7.

and prejudice. He persevered in the mode of whatever it takes, do it, as long as you do not point to me. Witnessing firsthand the building of BTW's network of power and his social gospel-pragmatic approach to reform, Chisum like other young black men of his time, believed that BTW was a hero who came to save the black race.⁴⁴ Uncle Tom wore a crown. Blacks had finally made a place in America. It was in-between worlds but it was their place. Witnessing firsthand the building of BTW's network of power and his social gospel-pragmatic approach to reform, Chisum like other young black men of his time, believed that BTW was a hero who had come to save the black race.⁴⁵

While Harlan questioned the morality of BTW by being in league with Chisum as his humble servant he neglects the history of the signature "your humble servant." In the first letter dated October 1, 1904, from Chisum to BTW, Chisum acknowledged that he was a disciple of BTW before the government decided to make BTW the spokesman for black America.⁴⁶ Chisum wrote that he was not a "recent convert to the principles of the Wizard of Tuskegee. I am an original Booker

⁴⁴ Louis Harlan, and Raymond. W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Open Book Edition, 1979, Volume 8: 1904 -1906* (online at University of Illinois Press, 1979), 77. In October 1904 Chisum sent a letter to BTW expressing his adoration for the black leader. See also Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 6. Abbott worshipped Washington and considered Washington his hero.

⁴⁵ Louis Harlan, and Raymond. W. Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Open Book Edition, 1979, Volume 8: 1904 -1906* (online at University of Illinois Press, 1979), 77. In October 1904 Chisum sent a letter to BTW expressing his adoration for the black leader. See also Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 6. Abbott worshipped Washington and considered Washington his hero.

⁴⁶ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 58.

Washingtonite.”⁴⁷ Chisum was convinced that Washington was the only man in the black America who was actually “working for the race . . . millions of us love you, worship your name and accept your counsel in the fullest measure.”⁴⁸ While Harlan belittled the idea of humble servitude that Chisum showed when he ended the letter “from your obedient humble servant,” it was a sincere address and also one used by many who studied European literature.⁴⁹ Classical study, including the writings of Abraham Lincoln, shows that the sentiment is in order for one as Chisum writing to BTW. Out of regard for his philosophy, Chisum, as a neophyte, offered BTW his life to use as desired. “If ever you need a real genuine piece of steel send for me . . . may I be pardoned for saying, that nature in putting me together forgot to put in fear. . . .”⁵⁰ While the phrase seems sarcastic by twentieth- and twenty-first century standards, and now archaic, it was commonly used in political letters by presidents and other personages. Chisum’s use of the terminology was a testament of him being an educated man, yet humbled to be a kingmaker. By the turn of the century, racial tensions flared high, and Jim Crow laws were being legislated that limited African American freedoms by replacing Reconstruction statues that had guaranteed political and civil liberties to blacks.

⁴⁷ Melvin Chisum to BTW, 1 October 1904, in Harlan and Smock, *BTWP, Volume 8*, 77.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Patrick Henry to Robert Pleasants, 18 January 1773, in Robert Meade, *Patrick Henry: Patriot in the Making* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1957). Henry wrote a letter to a Quaker correspondent using the same address, “Your humble servant.”

⁵⁰ Melvin Chisum to BTW, 1 October 1904, in Harlan and Smock *BTWP, Volume 8*, 77; Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 11 August 1933, OKCU.

Black journalists served as freedom fighters during the Progressive Era. They found the support they needed from outside of the black world, by publishing information for the world to see, believing liberal whites would read their papers and help. By 1903, Chisum entered the public stage as a journalist. He had the training in printing from his earlier school years. His writing skills were on par with his adversaries such as Thomas Fortune. His work and knowledge of journalism was well received within the New York, Boston, and Washington publishing communities. Black newspapermen such as William Trotter, who graduated from Harvard, trusted him and invited him to covert meetings and planning sessions. These black leaders did not realize that Chisum was a paid spy for the Tuskegee Machine. In the business of newspaper editing, Chisum was on par with the best journalists and newspaper editors in the country. He also had other missions going on for BTW and possibly for others outside of Tuskegee at the same time. By 1903 Chisum left the employ of Bishop William Derrick (1814-1913) to pursue his own entrepreneurial endeavors and attempted to work closely with BTW through Scott.

To say Chisum was an assistant and bodyguard to Bishop Derrick before his work with BTW, was to say he was making political connections. Originally from the West Indies, as a child of a planter and slave, Bishop Derrick had an extensive Moravian education. Bishop Derrick, became a naturalized American citizen during the Civil War. He served as in the Navy and fought in the battle of the Monitor and Merrimac. Derrick worked with the presidential candidate Governor William McKinley as BTW worked with vice president-to-be Theodore Roosevelt. His friend Emmett Scott ingratiated himself with one of the upcoming black leaders in the

United States by working with BTW. Chisum found himself a national icon. His years with Bishop Derrick groomed his political character and ambitions, missionary fervor, his style of dress, and his mode of carrying himself. Like BTW, Bishop Derrick owned several newspapers, including part ownership of the *Globe*.⁵¹

With so much emphasis on differing reform movements between W.E.B. DuBois and BTW, the historiography of the rise of the AME Church in politics does not receive its equitable place in politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass's mantle drifted in the first years after his death. Constructive leadership was vacated in the American black world. In 1895 when Booker T. Washington spoke at the Atlanta Exposition he did not immediately take on the title of the national leader of blacks. Prior to BTW becoming "the" national black leader through President Theodore Roosevelt's actions, Bishop Derrick was the centerpiece for black politics under President William McKinley. McKinley handed Derrick the privilege of appointing several patronage positions for blacks during his administration.⁵² As powerful as DuBois, Bishop Reverdy Ransom and Bishop Alexander Walters aligned themselves with the Niagara movement. Their names gave the movement credibility.⁵³ However, with President McKinley's death, the power struggle for the top black leader ended.

⁵¹ Frank Thomas Martha Simmons, *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons 1750 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2010). 257-261.

⁵² *Colored American* (Washington, DC), 8 February 1900; *Iowa Bystander*, (Des Moines), 28 August 1900; *Freeman* (Indiana), 6 March 1897; *Colored American* (Washington, DC), 9 August 1900; *Recorder* (Indiana), 29 August 1900.

⁵³ Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina

Chisum may have learned from Derrick to switch camps when necessary. In Virginia politics in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Bishop Derrick switched parties and ideals when he found it necessary to benefit his politics and beliefs for his race. Bishop Derrick with many other American Blacks joined the Readjuster Party. They collected taxes to pay the war debt. They also abolished the poll taxes, eliminated the whipping post for punishment of blacks, and created Virginia State University. In the 1880s seven black Readjusters won seats in the United States House of Representatives. At the end of Reconstruction, when Derrick found himself not only on the losing end of a political battle to Confederates such as General Fitzhugh Lee who became Governor in Virginia but that he was in harm's way, of Virginians who wanted to kill him, Bishop Derrick and his second wife went on a long visit to his home in the West Indies to wait the political climate to calm down. Later, he returned to ministry in New York State where he met and arranged for Chisum to be a bodyguard and assistant.

While Bishop Derrick was liberal according to excerpts in the Booker T. Washington Papers, Derrick and BTW did not consider themselves at odds. The relationship was tumultuous though. In his later letters to BTW, it seemed Chisum may have been paid to spy on the Bishop after 1906 when the Niagarites were forming. However, because of the cryptic letters it is hard to conclude whether it was Bishop Walters or Bishop Derrick. While both AME bishops joined the Niagara movement, they continued a relationship with BTW. Derrick supported BTW in the

Press, 1991). 173-176. Frazier. 33, 35, 37. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier* (London: University of Liverpool, 1974). 148.

New York Globe, but as reported by William Anderson to BTW, behind the scenes Derrick fought for a more radical movement against Jim Crow.⁵⁴

While Chisum allowed Scott to use his first newspaper for espionage purposes, it was a legitimate entity supported by subscribers all over the country. Chisum wrote to Scott in July of 1903 that he would do his best as a Texan to pay the bills when they came due. "You understand that I haven't a million, you understand also that I am a Texas Negro and keep my promises, and when salaries are due they will be paid, million or no million; and the 'Impending Conflict', I hope, through observing our Texas principles to give a life of usefulness."⁵⁵ Scott supported Chisum's use of the *Impending Conflict* newspaper in order to further BTW's agenda against his political enemies. There is little evidence that the Tuskegee Machine helped support the paper at all. At the beginning of the relationship Scott wrote to Washington in 1903, "Our New York friend can use Chisum in any way that we desire."⁵⁶ The newspaper was one of the strongest weapons blacks used in the defense of their race. The written word was also a powerful instrument of espionage when used as a manipulator of public opinion within the black community. Editors "achieved little monetary success, and [newspapers] were primarily vehicles for the editors to expound their views, punish opponents, and advance their personal political ambitions. ... Journalism was a distinctively unprofitable venture."⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Herb Boyd, "The Black Press: A Long History of Service and Advocacy," *Crisis* 98, no. 3 (March 1991).

⁵⁵ Melvin Chisum to Emmett Scott, 23 July 1903, in Harlan and Smock. *BTWP*, Volume 8, 222-223.

⁵⁶ Emmett Scott to BTW, 28 July 1903. *BTWP*, Volume 8, 272.

⁵⁷ Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior*, 86-87.

However, like the preachers, newspaper editors were considered leaders in the black community. Black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, A. Philip Randolph, William Trotter, and women such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett all edited newspapers.

Using the newspaper seems Chisum's first step to establish a relationship with BTW. Utilizing the struggling newspaper as a "straw man," Chisum attempted to waylay editor John Edward Bruce, or Bruce Grit, into BTW's political camp by trapping him into signing an agreement that he would not write anything negative about BTW.⁵⁸ Grit wrote positive articles about BTW and Tuskegee until 1900. But having been paid by an adversary of BTW in April 1903, Grit condemned a program BTW held at Madison Square Garden in the *Richmond Planet* calling BTW a "political pariah."⁵⁹ Grit and Chisum had a past and Grit was smart enough to keep his options open. So, Grit covered his back. In order to write without the burden of politics dictating his agenda, Grit took on full-time work at the New York Port Authority. This work supported his continued attacks on BTW without worry of having his finances cut off. Essentially, Grit sold his writing skills to the highest bidder, ignoring his contract with Chisum. "Bruce was for hire. And for this reason, Bruce demanded additional money to compensate for what his colleagues might well denounce as inconsistencies and opportunism."⁶⁰ Though Bruce took Chisum's money, as Grit, he

⁵⁸ Harlan, "The Secret Life of Booker T. Washington." 405. Harlan describes Chisum's paper as "a shaky little Negro magazine." Many small black and white papers were shaky during that time period.

⁵⁹ Peter Gilbert, *The Selected Writings of John Edward Bruce: Militant Black Journalist* (New York: Arno, 1971), 1-9.

⁶⁰ Ralph Crowder, "Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and John Edward Bruce: The Relationship of a Militant Black Journalist with the Father of Civil Rights and 'the Wizard of Tuskegee,'" *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 22, no. 2

lacked the integrity to stand by a contract he signed with Chisum to “not publish nor cause to be published, any letters or articles whatsoever, that can be, even remotely constructed as being antagonistic to Dr. Booker T. Washington.”⁶¹

Chisum found out that to be for hire under the Tuskegee Machine was not the same as being a part of the machine. Though Chisum used the newspaper as a straw man to fight for BTW, the Tuskegee Machine did not support his newspaper’s finances. Chisum put his money from other jobs and his name on the line for the Tuskegee Machine, but he gained no more support than the fees he was paid for the spying job. After the abrupt closure of the *Impending Conflict* in February 1904, Chisum faced backlash from the subscribers. It took Chisum three years to repay all the subscribers. Admitting in the *Yonkers Standard* that the 1903 folding of the *Impending Conflict* ruined him, the “well-known real estate operator” Melvin Chisum kept his good name by paying back everyone who lost money.⁶²

Instead of supporting him after he asked for financial help, the Tuskegee Machine responded by asking for names of secret society members for which they were paying him. BTW or Scott added a “congratulations” for repaying former subscribers with the subscript: “this is an act of honesty that very few white people ever perform. I am going to give you broad circulation to the fact. I shall use you in as many papers as I can. You set a high example in the direction of straight

(31 July 1998), 6; online at Proquest Ethnic News Watch.

⁶¹ Melvin Chisum to Emmett Scott, 23 July 1903, in Harlan and Smock, *BTWP Volume 7*, 222-223. See also Crowder, *John Edward Bruce*, 89.

⁶² “Mr. Chisum Makes Good,” *New York Age* (New York), 12 September 1907.

forwardness and honesty to the entire race in this matter.”⁶³ Harlan must be corrected on this matter; the *Impending Conflict* did not serve as a cover for spying. It was a legitimate effort on Chisum’s part to establish a business. It took four years for him to regain his name. Yet, Chisum did continue to do work for BTW after 1906. He diversified from undercover spy and provocateur to other covert work.

Like his roommate Paul Lawrence Dunbar and his wife, it seems that Chisum and his wife Mae struggled during this period. His wife became a hairdresser to supplement his income. Chisum did not want his wife working but gave in to necessity. Chisum did not change to become a family man. He continued to travel extensively and at will as he did before his wife became a part of his home. Chisum also worked as a special representative of the Equitable Life Assurance Society, published and sold *The Teach Yourself How to Play Either Organ or Piano Book* authored by Professor Theodore Drury, became a lease manager for newly opened apartments for blacks in New York, and became a licensed real estate broker to negotiate and arrange real estate transactions for blacks.

As for Harlan’s negative terminology of Chisum as spy, as far back as some of the first of the Judeo-Christian Biblical texts, spies were as honored as warriors. Spies played critical roles in the Civil War.⁶⁴ While Chisum’s identity in Louis Harlan’s books and articles contained only the negative spectrum of Chisum’s career as spy and provocateur, his labeling of other facets of his life as mainly a cover for

⁶³ BTW to Chisum, 18 October 1907, Harlan Papers, Box 43, Spies, Chisum folder, UMC Libraries.

⁶⁴ Thomas Ryan, *Spies, Scouts, and Secrets in the Gettysburg Campaign* (California: Savis Beatie, 2015), xxi.

his spying endeavors is a stretch. Harlan's own excellent research notes on Chisum at the University of Maryland show that Chisum's spying did not pay. Unlike other wars and battles, Chisum's work was done relatively in the open. If he was detected, the spying ended. Chisum's career as boxer, bodyguard, newspaperman, and realtor could not be separated into separate identities. He was not like a Clark Kent who had a secret identity as Superman. He could be easily identified in the marketplace in New York, New Jersey, and Washington, DC.

Chisum was doubly under cover not only from Niagaraites (forerunners of NAACP) but also from Bookerites. Chisum made contracts with the Tuskegee Machine for delivery of information as only one of their detectives in the northern part of the United States. Chisum had a network of henchmen. His detective work crossed racial, political, economic, and social barriers. His business was about making money for his enterprise, paying his workers, taking care of his family as well as helping people in his community based from Texas to New York.

Harlan's work on Chisum's life during the first quarter of the twentieth century seemed to imply that the term "spy" was unacceptable among politicians and warriors. Spying—its implementation of strategy and tactics for the right cause—can be perceived as honorable. Who is honored was ascertained by who comes out the winner. If W.E.B. DuBois won the campaign against BTW, then Chisum's life was not honorable. However, the BTW and DuBois situation was not that simple. Washington died in 1915. His lieutenants continued his work of "civilization building" from within. Emmett Scott, Chisum, and others worked with the United

States government until 1940. Within that time period, 1915-1940, W.E.B. DuBois and others—even black socialists, “enemies of enemies”- began working with Bookerites. By the 1930s even DuBois would throw in his hat with Bookerites.⁶⁵

Washington’s secret life was not the exception but the norm of one who got a chance to excel and become a national leader. There were all in the briar patch together, ditching the noose and the frying pan that came with getting caught. Unlike some other blacks during their lifetime, Sam Hose (1875-1899) was not only set up by his town’s people, but lynched in Coweta County, Georgia, his body was fried in public, chopped up, sold, and handed out to his white community for being a successful black man. Harlan was wrong. Washington was never just a man in his time period. A man without dignity to stand for justice was not a man. He had to remain cloaked in mystery and handle his wand mightily. The fight for equality in the United States commenced in “all-out-war” from the standpoint of blacks. Like European and global counterparts, in war American blacks used the lucrative job of spying while adopting the mindset and ancient proverb that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” meaning opposing parties could work together against a shared enemy. Melvin Chisum wrote to BTW to explain the nuances of the growing Niagara movement that eventually became the NAACP. In the letter he links the psychology of blacks to the time period. For some reason the missive was not used in any of Harlan’s lectures, articles, or books. The letter interprets the black mindset recognized in the books of black authors in contrast to the way Harlan and other

⁶⁵ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919-1963*, vol. 2 (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000).

historians interpreted the DuBois - BTW conflict during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Refitting Chisum's character to the time period and showing his relationship to BTW serves the purpose of opening the lenses of history to see how blacks manipulated change in the first quarter of the twentieth century. They may not have won major campaigns in the Progressive Era but as a unit they manipulated outcomes. As Shawn Leigh Alexander described in his book, *An Army of Lions* (2012), black factions came together to fight, use propaganda, to lobby, to boycott, and to employ other means as early as 1906 in the civil rights struggle.⁶⁶ Yet Alexander did not have a specific case to explore, because of lack of someone such as Chisum to bridge the theory. However, understanding that Chisum worked with BTW later than 1906 helps delineate what happened in the Midwest during the mid-teens. Activating a spy-cum-journalist who worked for both liberals and conservatives in the Midwest made a dramatic difference in the outcome of the black struggle for civil rights across the nation.

Shawn Alexander concentrated on the pre-NAACP era. Adding the work of undercover men such as Chisum to his book develops a clearer picture, and exploring the post-NAACP period during the life of BTW illuminates how these factions still carried out the work of an army of lions. With a spy like Chisum, meta language, and an understanding of American black civil religion, black leaders achieved breakthroughs in justice by acting like cats who chased a mouse, quietly

⁶⁶ Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), xii.

and conservatively. Chisum made waves in states like Oklahoma that ultimately changed the face of politics across the country. Chisum's undercover work in the Midwest chipped away at the good-old-boys' networks. This is the point that historian Nancy Weiss picked up in her book *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*.⁶⁷

These events also give insight to the larger narrative of Chisum's life as an entrepreneur and businessman struggling to move into the Tuskegee Machine and the economy of his time period. Chisum attempted to keep work as a reformer in the early 1900s. Blacks understood that divided they would fail. During the first quarter of the twentieth century two divisions—segregated by the function of vocation or education—emerged as the central order of reform building. One faction included white socialists, including the Jewish people who supported W.E.B. DuBois' and his developing NAACP. The other faction's followed President William McKinley's support of Bishop William Derrick and President Theodore Roosevelt's support of BTW as national leaders. Sometimes overlooked because of the issues between BTW and DuBois, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was also a powerful entity in the first quarter of the twentieth century.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3-33. Brooks, "Oklahoma's First Black Governor": Dr. Isaac William Young."; "Driving Black America: Melvin Jackson Chisum Kingmaker."; Maceo Crenshaw Dailey, *When the Saints Go Hobbling In: Emmett Jay Scott and the Booker T. Washington Movement* (El Paso, Texas: Sweet Earth Flying Press, 2013). Dailey rounds out his study by explaining the nuances of the Bookerite community.

⁶⁸ Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White*, 158 -190. Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 41-48. C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church Since Frazier*, (London: University of Liverpool, 1974), 135-152.

During this period, a great migration of American and foreign blacks flowed into New York City and Flushing, New York. According to Fortune's newspaper, the *New York Age*, the arrivals "within recent years from all parts of the South [have] made it possible for a great number and variety of business enterprises to be controlled and operated by men and women."⁶⁹ As in other parts of the country, the availability of land was central in developing the landscape for blacks. Several black realty companies came into existence. Not able to secure large capital for operating purposes, several of them attained places of distinction in financial circles. The Metropolitan Realty Company owned over \$100,000 of real estate and boasted of \$15,000 worth of mercantile business annually. The Afro American Realty Company, with Philip Payton, Jr., as president, found sites for black homes in localities with low crime and outside of tenement dwellings in New York and other cities. Emmett Scott sat on the board of directors that owned nine of the buildings and controlled seventy-five New York City apartment houses valued at over \$900,000. Fortune wrote in the *New York Age*, that other men who were aggressive in their ventures as brokers included M. A. Simmons, John Mosley, Melvin J. Chisum, and J.P. Bourke and Son.⁷⁰

Chisum's venture into the real estate market proved both positive and fatal. A letter gleaned from the Peabody papers in the file of the Harlan collection shows that during this period Chisum continued working for missions, on the side, for the

⁶⁹ *New York Age* (New York), 28 February 1907.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Frank Doubleday and G.F. Peabody families.⁷¹ These men supported him when he suffered problems in the real estate market. The Greater Northern Realty Company was incorporated at 308 West 119th Street in New York City with capital stock of \$20,000 shares at \$5 apiece. The good name of the president of the Greater Northern Realty Company, Melvin Chisum, landed the company major support. Another name held prestige, AME Bishop Alexander Walters. However, the power of the black press reared its head against clergymen “taking an active part in the various financial concerns.” Bishop Walters resigned with the words “The only reason for having consented to go into your and other enterprises was to help the race and so far as my money goes I shall continue to help those I believe to be worthy, for I believe in this way only can older men of our race help the younger ones.”⁷² It is apparent that the enterprise was legitimate. However, in the time period Chisum was under cover and spying on the Niagara movement. Chisum reported to BTW conversations that he thought worthy of BTW’s knowledge.

Chisum’s influence grew in New York. The housing market boomed and Chisum operated in Long Island, New York, representing the Great Northern Company. On Sunday October 6, 1907, the company launched a public celebration for the erection of a “colony” of black homes, a row of improved homes for upwardly mobile blacks. He proposed combining the savings of working blacks. Together this group would erect their exclusive neighborhoods. They bought lots on Forest Avenue in Flushing. The work on five houses started. AME pastor Rev. Dr. William H.

⁷¹ Harlan Papers, Box 43, Spies, Chisum folder, UMD Libraries.

⁷² “Bishop Walters Resigns,” *New York Age* (New York), 5 March 1908.

Lacey, (1869-?) who pastored at Flushing, New York, purchased the first stock for \$450. An unidentified Flushing contractor developed the plans and contracts to build the homes. However, before the homes were built, the housing boom collapsed. The work on the homes stopped. The contractor went bankrupt and left Flushing for New Jersey, and was subsequently killed in a car accident. Chisum, under duress, tried to keep the project afloat, but to no avail. Ultimately the investors sued Chisum personally instead of the Great Northern Realty Company for their investments.

CHAPTER V

CHISUM'S PILGRIMAGE IN OKLAHOMA

WHERE THE WIND COMES SWEEPING DOWN THE PLAINS

“My father told me that Booker T. Washington was aware that the politicians and officials of Oklahoma were stealing much of the money the U.S. Government was spending in the region for the care and upkeep of the Indians. Why Booker T. Washington was upset about this I do not know, but he wanted to expose this fraud, misappropriation of funds, and thievery. He sent my father to Oklahoma City with the instructions to establish a newspaper whose primary function would be to publicize this situation.”¹

---Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr. to Author

There is a saying in Oklahoma that “if you don’t like the weather, wait fifteen minutes, it will change.” In the middle of first quarter of the twentieth century, predicting political outcomes for American Black Oklahomans was as turbulent as predicting the weather. A wintry mix came in the summer of 1914 when Melvin Jackson Chisum, then a slender, nappy-headed, charismatic but shrewd espionage agent, accepted a mission to find out what was going on with Indian money for Booker T. Washington (BTW) who had charge of a portion of the Indian work

¹ Dr. Melvin Chisum to Author 29 November 2006 held in author’s notebook.

of the national government through Tuskegee Institute.¹ However, Chisum wound up deposing the American Black leader in Oklahoma, Inman Page. Chisum's interloping in Afro Oklahoma politics became a catalyst for political change in the country over the next fifty years. His rash undercover work in Oklahoma elevated Roscoe Dunjee from a truck farmer to a newspaper editor. In the 1940s Dunjee became nationally known civil rights politician. Chisum's work also positioned Dr. Isaac William Young into becoming an American "Father of Black Democracy" in the 1920s and into the 1930s.

In 1897 the Territorial Board of Education opened the first state segregated college for blacks, Oklahoma Colored Agriculture and Normal University (Langston) in Langston City, Oklahoma. Rev. John Dunjee, Baptist missionary to Oklahoma, adept in political protocol, helped establish Langston and other black colleges such as Shorter Baptist College in West Virginia, Hampton Institute in Virginia, and Spellman University in Georgia. Using his shrewdness Dunjee manipulated the Oklahoma Regents choice for president of Langston. Under his guidance their choice, Jefferson Davis Randolph, declined the position at the very last moment leaving the regents no option but to hire Inman Page. In 1897 Page was the other giant in American Black education in the central west very similar to BTW at Tuskegee Institute. Page performed as the black political and social leader in Oklahoma.

¹ Chisum had the same tight curl pattern that his father had. Blacks refer to it as nappy.

Thirty years after the emancipation of slaves, nine years after the end of Reconstruction, Page's mission included the development of social reform, establishment of ideological foundations and installation of an economic structure for blacks in the state of Oklahoma. Page was soon recognized as the "Giant of University Hill." Under Page's guidance students of Langston formed a leadership class of American Blacks sometimes defined as the "Talented Tenth." Slowly he guided his elementary graduates, college graduates and certified teachers to become trailblazers in Oklahoma. In spite of his success, instead of celebration of his accomplishments, seventeen years later as quick as a flash of lightning across the prairie sky, in August 1915, Inman Page was no longer president of Langston! What happened? The *Guthrie Daily* leader reported: "Page resigned of his own volition stating that he was sick and tired of combating the continual attacks made on him by political enemies of his own race and in his own school."² The *Tulsa Star* reported that Page was under grave charges and that he "resigned to avoid a deal of unpleasant notoriety."³ His lawyer, Moorman Pruiett, stated "the devilish work that has been done to injure President Page may be charged to a group of black Democrats who want to get rid of him in order that some of them may succeed him at Langston."⁴ The *Harlow's Weekly* reported:

² "Negro School Head Resigns; Will Prosecute: President Inman Page Will Now Go After Enemies Who Persecuted," *Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie), 1 September 1915.

³ "Father of Langston University Resigns: Serious Charges Brought Up Against Man Who Started The School 17 Years Ago: Appointment of Atoka Man Comes as Surprise," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 3 September 1915.

⁴ "Negro School Head Resigns; Will Prosecute," *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 1 September 1915. "Serious Charges Brought Up Against Man Who Started the School 17 Years Ago: Appointment of Atoka Man Comes as Surprise," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 3

Oklahoma had a very successful Negro school at Langston. The Board of Education found the Du Bois idea had been adopted. Du Bois held that the Negroes developed by attaining political and social equality with the white race. Inman E. Page could not be convinced of the inapplicability of the idea in Oklahoma. It was necessary to remove him. The new policy follows the teaching of Booker T. Washington.⁵

Most twentieth and twenty-first century historiography followed Zella Patterson's non-controversial evaluation in her 1970s book *Langston University* – Page resigned – to become President of Macon College in Missouri.⁶ Her historiography stretched the truth.

What was the truth? After seventeen years, why was Inman Page so abruptly let go from Langston? What were the attacks and unpleasant notoriety he complained of? How did the Board of Education find out his ideological differences from BTW? Was it conspiracy or the code of Afro Texans to care for each other? The Tuskegee Machine, a nationwide network of institutions including banks, newspapers, businesses in the black community controlled by BTW at Tuskegee Institute, in Alabama, was not at the center of Page's downfall. Melvin Chisum never really became a part of the inner circle of Tuskegee until after the death of BTW. Page was a liberal educator in direct contention with the conservatism of BTW. From his articles in the *Tribune* newspaper, Chisum attacked Page for what he considered unacceptable conditions he found at Langston University. It can be

September 1915.

⁵ *Harlow's Weekly*, (Oklahoma City), 3 June 1916.

⁶ Zella Patterson, *Langston University* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979). 32.

questioned if Chisum had more of an agenda than BTW's mission to check on the welfare of Indians and their income when he went to Oklahoma. Chisum seemed to have his own agenda. Research has uncovered that there may have been a family relation at Langston University. Perhaps he saw a chance to develop his idea of vigilante journalism based on the plight of Indians; however no evidence about his mindset has been discovered except the articles he wrote in the *Tribune*.

In November of 1914, Melvin Chisum made moves related to his espionage effort in Oklahoma. Dr. Isaac William Young, who was mayor of Boley, welcomed Chisum to Oklahoma. Young introduced him to members of the community through the newspaper the *Boley Progress*. In 1914 Chisum was already making his home in Okfuskee County, Oklahoma.⁷ He was not new to the area. He participated in past events with his childhood friend Dr. Young. In 1911 Chisum helped Young secure a railroad car and organize a railroad caravan to Arkansas. The party train caravan traveled to BTW's Little Rock Arkansas for National Negro Business League.⁸ Support networks of Bookerites like Dr. Young were already settled in Oklahoma by 1914.⁹ In Oklahoma, Chisum's journalistic and business reputation preceded him.

⁷ Booker T. Washington to Melvin Chisum, 14 December 1914, vol 11, BTWP. Also article "Washington," *Daily Oklahoman*, (Oklahoma City), 19 November 1905. There was considerable rivalry among the black leaders to entertain Washington. Inman Page introduced BTW. E. I. Saddler was the toast masker at the banquet.

⁸ Boley Commercial Club, *Boley Oklahoma, Facts About Boley Oklahoma: The Largest and Wealthiest Exclusive Negro City in the World*, (Boley: Boley Progress, 1911). 6.

⁹ E. I. Saddler, a laborer who also worked as a lawyer, was one of Washington's first agents in the state of Oklahoma. J. W. Adams moved to Okmulgee, Indian Territory in 1904. C. W. Perry, a machinist and brakeman for the railroad, settled in Boley, Oklahoma's largest black town. Dr. Isaac William Young, medical doctor and philanthropist, "cast down his bucket" in Oklahoma in 1908. Young also stealthily moved into the position of mayor of Boley. They attempted to implement

Even whites accepted him as “one of the best informed Negroes in the country.”¹⁰ Through Washington’s politically-positioned men and supportive newspapers Chisum quickly gained a strong influence among Oklahomans including but not limited to Dr. Isaac Young, mayor of Boley, E.E. McDaniel, of South McAlester, E.I Sadler of Guthrie, Coody Johnson of Wewoka, B. Douglas Russell of Langston, W. H. Twine of Muskogee, M.A. Sorrell of Vinita, J.D. Springer of Ardmore, E.O Tyler of Kingfisher, J. D. Randolph of OKC, C. T. Taliferro of Perry, John – of Pawnee, Charles Yates of Enid, and John Hogan, mayor of Langston.¹¹

The *Boley Progress* newspaper, that Young supported financially, published an article that stated Chisum was a leading journalist in the country and welcomed in Boley by the editor and mayor.¹² BTW had a special place in his vision of Boley. Boley was an all black town that BTW invested in heavily.¹³ Washington sent Young to Boley in 1901 to look around. Under BTW’s persuasion, Young relocated his family there from Alexandria, Louisiana in 1908. He “laid down his bucket” and opened the largest cotton gin Boley ever had in 1908.¹⁴ As mayor of Boley, Young championed Chisum through the newspaper.¹⁵ Young was successful as a medical

Washington’s plans of building businesses and trades among Boley’s people.

¹⁰ “Chisum Makes Leap for Freedom; Captured,” *The Leader*, (Sentinel) 6 April 1916. The article talks about Chisum as a leading black journalist in the country.

¹¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, (Oklahoma City) August 8, 1906.

¹² *Boley Progress* (Boley) 5 April, 1908.

¹³ Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns*, (Kansas: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979) 157-163.

¹⁴ *Boley Progress* (Boley), 5 April 1908.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

doctor, philanthropist, and called the leading black Republican in the state. By 1912 Young was Boley's mayor.¹⁶

Because the *Boley Progress* was a leading black newspaper in Oklahoma the editor's and mayor's acceptance of him gave Chisum the catalyst that helped set him up for his assignment. The *Boley Progress* reported that Chisum traveled around the state gaining acceptance for the paper and support for his effort. In the spring of 1915 Chisum started the *Tribune* newspaper in Oklahoma City. In August 1914, Chisum, now considered an Oklahoman, was elected president of the National Negro Press Association (NNPA). This was a powerful indicator of trust from his fellow newspapermen and a high honor for Oklahoma. The newspaper was his weapon of choice. It seems that it was in the Central-West that Chisum developed his technique of using newspapers for espionage. Chisum's vision was to "make his administration stand out as a distinctive promoter of closer relations between the press and plain people."¹⁷

What seems a trap was steadily laid. The August 15, 1915 issue of the *Tribune* explained that within the NNPA a strategy was devised for black editors to be a part of a national vigilance committee.¹⁸ The group's purpose was to inform affluent whites of the horrors committed against the black community by black

¹⁶ *Boley Progress* (Boley), 30 July 1915; *Boley Progress* (Boley), 16 July 1915; *Boley Progress* (Boley), 6 August 1915.

¹⁷ *Freeman* (Cincinnati), 3 October 14.

¹⁸ "National Negro Press Association," *The Tribune* (Oklahoma City), 20 August 1915. Each member of the executive committee was a member of vigilante committee. Two papers in Oklahoma linked H. W. Twine in Muskogee, and A.J. Smitherman in Tulsa.

leaders so that whites could step in to stop corruption of black leadership towards their own race. Their mission was to “provide a means whereby a favorable comment by press, telegram or letter might reach a large but silent class of white men who believe in fair play.”¹⁹ Apparently there was some validity to this program. Newspapers named as members of the NNPA included the *Tulsa Star* edited by A. J. Smitherman, and the *Muskogee Cimeter* edited by W. H. Twine, accepted the program along with other papers across the country. Black leaders harming their own race must have been a nationwide problem.

A New Army for Black Indians In Oklahoma

The *Chicago Defender's*, March 14, 1914, headline about Sarah Rector, “Colored Girl Kidnapped? Not At Tuskegee: RICHEST CHILD OF THE RACE MYSTERIOUSLY DISSAPPEARS” served as a fuse. This chapter contends that Tuskegee leader Emmett Scott’s signature on the article was a covert call for nationwide attention to focus on Oklahoma politics. It suggests that just as the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand served as one of the catalyst for nations to combine in war against an enemy, in the same way Scott’s signature on the article alerted the country that it was time to form a ring of fire around Oklahoma to contain exploitation of mixed-black-Indian race children and freedmen.²⁰

¹⁹ “NNPA Vigilante Committee,” *Tribune*, (Oklahoma City), 20 August 1915.

²⁰ Mixed black Indian race as a designation contains the idea that not all Indian children had once been slaves. Freedmen were children of slaves. Mixed black Indians were sometimes of other relationships between Indians and blacks.

While Jim Crow seemed an overwhelming adversary, American blacks were not completely helpless in the scheme of things; they played highly covert games in getting what they wanted. As Shawn Alexander critiqued in an *Army of Lions* (2012), civil rights activists crossed lines of contention to organize even when they held opposing beliefs.²¹ Supporting black Oklahomans, blacks from around the country sought to aid dispossessed freedmen and Indians who inherited oil rich lands but were being swindled. Sources from black newspapers, letters, and manuscripts confirm how black leaders organized in racial solidarity in an attempt to stop white and black flagrant misuse of political, social and economic power against black heirs to wealthy estates in Oklahoma between 1913 and 1915.

The Tuskegee Machine, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (NAACP) and other factions organized: Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee, AME Bishops William Derrick and Alexander Walters, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Mary Talbert, Arthur Spingarn, William Pickens, and Charles Chesnutt of the NAACP; Tuskegee patriots Emmett J. Scott, Henry Hunt, J. Rosamond Johns, and James Weldon Johnson; Niagaraites Charles Bentley, L. M. Hershaw, and Mason Hawkins; and educators Kelley Miller and Lucy Laney to rectify black problems across the nation through intervention and organization. National leaders understood that black Indian children became just another group of blacks in the Progressive Era. This group of blacks used their best tools—newspapers, national meetings, and ace tricksters and spies such as efficiency agent, real estate developer,

²¹ Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2012)*. This is the general thesis of his book.

and newspaperman Melvin Chisum. They did not win overtly but in their covert ways they changed the outcomes of the lives of many Indians and freedmen. Oklahoma politics and networks proved too strong a force to break. Yet, they established a network prominent enough to let Oklahoma and the United States government know they were being watched and judged by other Anglo Americans.

By 1914 Chisum's spying background was known among the higher echelons or leaders of the black community. This group of blacks used their best tools, newspapers, national meetings, and ace tricksters and spies, such as real estate developer, and newspaperman Melvin Chisum to tackle national problems of the black race. The late Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., wrote that his father told him that his mission in Okmulgee was to "expose the exploitation of Indian and Freedmen."²² It was rare for blacks to overtly win against Jim Crow. Even with Melvin Chisum, in the long run, Oklahoma greed, politicians, and networks within the federal government proved too strong a force to break. Yet, the community of leaders established a network. The work he did in this period became pivotal for Chisum in the following years. For the first time recorded, Chisum moved from being a neophyte and he turned one of BTW's missions into a personal mission. During the period he attacked Inman Page, the president of Colored Agriculture and Normal University in Langston, Oklahoma (Langston). Louis Harlan should have written that the genie left the box.

²² Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 15 August 2005. Held in author's notebook.

Instead of coming to Oklahoma as BTW's espionage agent, Chisum used his presidency of the NNPA as his cover. Chisum was on the ground in Oklahoma, working with other Bookerite newspapermen. Already, the owner of the *Baltimore Tribune* in Maryland, Chisum bought the *Okmulgee Light* newspaper and allegedly moved to Muskogee, the home of the Indian Bureau. Even though he was married Chisum had no real home but roamed the country. By this period Chisum was estranged from his wife Mae who lived in Maryland and worked as a hairdresser. Hundreds of miles away from Maryland Chisum established a new newspaper in Oklahoma. The *Okmulgee Light's* motto was "The Best for Him: Fighting Fabrication in Church, State and Business." The "non- denominational and unbiased" newspaper came into existence in May of 1914 in time for the National Negro Business League meeting in August.²³ Articles covered mostly national news from the Tuskegee news services. While Chisum started a newspaper, as the *Crisis* editor, newspaper of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), W.E.B. DuBois and his sleuth and lawyer pummeled Oklahomans with letters, and the local, state, and national newspapers kept their watch on Oklahoma heiress Sarah Rector.

BTW also remained involved in Oklahoma politics by moving his National Negro Business League meeting to Muskogee. Blacks from all over the country convened in Muskogee for the largest gathering of blacks in America that year. Melvin Chisum, the journalist and *Baltimore Tribune* editor, was elected president of the NNPA, a major part of the Tuskegee Machine. In December 1914 Melvin Chisum, spy and provocateur to BTW and efficiency agent for others who paid him, and

²³ *Okmulgee Light* (Okmulgee), 3 May 1914.

former assistant to a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, came to Oklahoma on what seemed like a mission of retribution. He was the best covert black spy the black nation had to deal with difficult issues of race in the Jim Crow South. William Harris wrote that Chisum was one of many black men who did secret missions.²⁴ Wendell Dabney wrote about Chisum's capacity for shifting characters to meet the needs of the community.²⁵ In *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Others*, Dabney described Chisum's predilection for saving the needy.²⁶ The editor of the *Freeman* newspaper in Illinois wrote in his "Short Flights" column that Chisum, president of the NNPA and editor of the *Baltimore Tribune* "had something up his sleeves and would surprise the country soon."²⁷

According to information published in the *Oklahoma City Tribune*, the NNPA, under newly elected Melvin Chisum as president, started a campaign in 1914 to take care of plain people or people who lived a simple way of life. Chisum and more than seventy other editors across the nation formed a vigilante committee to fight crimes committed by black leaders against plain people around the country. The editors would find and "inform affluent whites of the horrors committed against the black community by black leaders so that whites could step in to stop corruption of black

²⁴ William Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-47* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

²⁵ Wendell Dabney, *Cincinnati's Colored Citizens* (Cincinnati, OH: Dabney Publishing Company, 1926), 122.

²⁶ Wendell Dabney, *Chisum's Pilgrimage and Other's* ((Cincinnati, OH: Dabney Publishing Company, 1927), 7.

²⁷ *Freeman*, (Indianapolis), 28 November 1914.

leadership towards their own race.”²⁸ The agenda had two prongs in Oklahoma for Chisum the black Indian investigation he did for BTW and his own vigilante work for under the auspices of the NNPA at Langston City, Oklahoma.

The Dawes Commission allotted to many of the Creek, Choctaw, Seminole black Indians and freedmen land that was unfit for agriculture. In the long run, these blacks seemed to prosper because under a top soil useless for farming their acreage was rich with natural gas and oil. It turned out oil was seeping out of the ground. Allotment was a colonial policy that forced Creeks to reduce their nationhood to a carved up piece of land. For historian David Chang, “imperial whiteness was their inborn nature of stealing land, remaining on it and governing the land.”²⁹ Blacks and Indians, and black Indians, became rich overnight. Some of them did not even know of their wealth. Oklahoma seemed a perfect venue for using the new vigilante tools of crime fighting instituted by the NNPA.

A cryptic code was sent out by Scott to blacks and their supporters around the nation. Tuskegee leader Emmett Scott’s signature on the article, “Black Girl Kidnapped?” served as a covert call for nationwide attention to focus on Oklahoma politics regarding black Indians and freedmen. What agency did blacks have to fight against the government during Jim Crow, “lily-white” political parties in Congress, and blatant racism and outright cruelty against blacks and Indians to help bring justice to these non-Anglos in Oklahoma? A network of national black leaders arose

²⁸ “NNPA Vigilante Committee,” *Tribune* (Oklahoma City), 20 August 1915.

²⁹ David Chang, *Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). 81.

to employ the most powerful weapons they had—the newspaper, their honor, subterfuge, and their spies—to dilute crimes of political, social, and economic nature. This group of black leaders used their agency in the time of Jim Crow to fight powerful, sometimes dishonest, government forces, seeking power and monetary gain to help mixed-race Indians and freedmen maintain their inherited fortunes. Rufus Logan wrote a letter to the editor of the *Professional World*, an Indiana newspaper, in 1914 stating that, “In no state in the Union have Negroes been robbed, actually robbed with impunity and openly, as in this State (Oklahoma), and today white men are worth millions who have built up their fortunes by thievery.”³⁰ His letter mimicked words sent from Muskogee, Oklahoma, to the *Washington Bee* in November 1913.³¹ He gained information through a network only described as “Muskogee, Ok” and the date. The newspaper source, which generated the information, remained unnamed. Black leaders and newspapers fought together, bombarding the world with information about Oklahoma politics when blacks held no other tangible weapon but the written word. Where did they get the information - from “An Army of Lions” - with a spy who settled in Oklahoma near the lands of the freedmen and Indians linking the plain people with the justice league.

No written rules of how blacks received various properties remain. It seems that full blood or mixed-race white Indians who understood the value of farming had a choice in selecting their land. However, other historians, through oral history and interpretation, have uncovered vague ideas about the Indian allotment process.

³⁰ *Professional World*, (Illinois), 14 December 1914.

³¹ “Negroes Robbed: Demand for Fair Play,” *Washington Bee* (Washington D.C.), 29 November 1913.

Historian of Oklahoma Indians, Angie Debo, wrote that “the rich valley land around Muskogee was largely taken by freedmen, who had settled in that vicinity when their masters had fled from Northern armies during the Civil War.”³² Stacy Patton’s view was that the “the white settlers received the more ideal land for farming while the rocky and hilly lands were allotted to Indians and freedmen.”³³ However the allotments were distributed, many mixed blood blacks gained oil rich lands. In the *Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois repeated information from the *Muskogee Cimeter* about the land of Danny Tucker, a ten-year-old boy. The 160 acres allotted to him for farm purposes is “rock and hilly, no ten acres slanting the same way and is virtually unfit for farming.” Indian land was a blessing and curse for undereducated, underprivileged, indigent land-poor, mineral-rich blacks who could not pay taxes on their land and had little legal knowledge of their rights in Oklahoma. DuBois ended the September 1914 article with these words, “[I]t is needless to add that a white man has been made Danny Tucker’s guardian.”

In order to filter money into the mainstream and allow whites to profit from Oklahoma lands and wealth, in 1912 the federal government granted the Oklahoma state courts jurisdiction and the ability to declare allottees incompetent and to appoint caretakers for protection of their property. Oklahoma politicians used the positions of guardianship as part of the political patronage system. According to Alexandra Harmon in her book *Rich Indians* (2010), politicians embraced the ritual of guardianship as part of their payoff. According to Harmon’s vast research of

³² Debo. 98.

³³ Stacey Patton, "The Richest Colored Girl in the World: Sarah Rector's Unusual Tale Is a Singular Story of Racially Motivated Greed and Corruption," *Crisis* 2010.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) records, United States House and Senate reports, and court documents, the FBI files showed that legal predators were not above murdering Indians for their money. Harmon explains that the idiom “federal guardianship” became no more than a tactic between whites “to limit federal power in order to siphon off Indian wealth for themselves.”³⁴ This understanding of guardianship was used as a political and economic tool in Oklahoma communities for private guardians and lawyers to make money off rich Indians by declaring them incapable of handling their wealth. It was also the exhibition of whites’ belief in their entitlement in the age of progress. As did whites across the country, whites in Oklahoma believed in their racial superiority. Blacks and Indians were lesser members of the species.

Arthur Smitherman, editor of a Muskogee newspaper and later the *Tulsa Star* wrote that white guardians, sanctioned by Muskogee judges, used money from Sarah Rector, an heiress, and Luther Manuel, a twelve-year-old, mixed-race, black Indian boy, to build segregated apartment blocks and business districts in downtown Muskogee. The areas were in districts in which the children could not shop because of their blackness. For these white supremacists, people of color did not deserve to have wealth when whites remained poor in the same state. However, in their view, minority wealth could be used to support white progress.³⁵

³⁴ Alexandra Harmon, *Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 2010). 196-197.

³⁵ Arthur Smitherman, “Segregation Gets Solo-Plexus Blow,” *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 23 September 1915.

Skimming money from their charges' accounts was too easy to resist. Harmon describes the exploitation as "blatant and cruelly illegal." In 1925 a witness, George Hewitt, admitted, "The Guardianship business . . . was one of the institutions of the State of Oklahoma."³⁶ Angie Debo's book *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (1940) corroborates Harmon's references. Debo wrote that forgery, embezzlement, criminal conspiracy, misuse of notary's seals, and other forms of swindling occurred with regularity. The courts remained overwhelmed with guardianship frauds on their dockets. Sometimes Oklahoma courts shortened jail sentences for criminal guardians based on letters from community leaders and the Governor. However, several attorneys were disbarred and others suspended for malpractice of their guardianship duties.³⁷ In the *Tulsa Star*, editor Arthur Smitherman recounts that not only white guardians but "some Negro guardians on account of their dislike for the art of bookkeeping have afforded examples that necessitated their being sent to McAlester to split rocks. Yet, all the same, there are a few Negroes in Muskogee who could take proper care of the Rectors, Manuels, and other estates."³⁸

Several heirs of freedmen became entangled in the web of fortune-hunting whites and the Oklahoma government. Stacey Patton observes, "Oklahoma's newly elected state officials quickly recognized that the presence of thousands of land-owning children of color such as Sarah Rector ran contrary to the white

³⁶ Harmon, *Rich Indians*, 198.

³⁷ Debo. 312-314.

³⁸ Smitherman, "Segregation Gets Solo-Plexus Blow," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 23 September 1915.

fundamental ideas about American citizenship and racial hierarchy. There was too much land and money at stake to allow the federal government to maintain 'protective' policies that would allow so many black children to capitalize on the resources and become full-fledged citizens once they reached their age of majority. The strategic control of black Indian children and freedmen was understood as a necessary strategy "in a fluid political situation with topsy-turvy race relations threatening to their economic success and independence."³⁹ This paternalistic control would pit at least one Oklahoma guardian against the plans made for Sarah Rector at Tuskegee. Sarah Rector was a descendant of slaves owned by Creeks at the beginning of the Civil War. In 1914, she was one of the richest women in Oklahoma if not the richest woman in the world with an income of \$112,000–118,000 a year. She had 160 acres of oil rich land.

Sarah Rector's plight as a black Indian with roots from slavery made her the perfect candidate for Margaret Murray Washington's program for reforming young women at Tuskegee Institute. The National Federation of Afro American Women chose Mrs. Washington as its first president in 1895. Booker T. Washington chose her as his third wife in 1893. Mrs. Washington served as dean of women at Tuskegee Institute. She also organized women's clubs. An activist around the country on several occasions, Mrs. Washington spoke to audiences from the podium after her husband finished his speeches. Tuskegee Institute was the premier black college with the premier black couple in America during the Progressive Era—the political, beautiful, educated leaders of the black realm. BTW made it clear that as president

³⁹ Patton, "The Richest Colored Girl in the World," 34.

of the National Colored Women's Clubs, his wife, as the first lady of black America, would be a mentor for Sarah Rector. "It is the duty of the national Federation of Women's clubs," the newspaper article asserted, "of which Mrs. Booker T. Washington is president, to see as far as possible the parents of this little girl is not "boneyed" with any love affairs by bankers or grafters, but that on the other hand, that she becomes well educated and encouraged to marry one of her own race."⁴⁰

In March of 1914, keeping track of Sarah through black newspapers, the world applauded the moving of ten-year-old Creek Freedman millionaire Sarah Rector from living in a shack in Muskogee, Oklahoma, to reside with the most influential black leaders in America.⁴¹ But there was a hitch. Not willing to let the heiress out of their sight, T. J. Porter, Sarah Rector's court - appointed white guardian, and her parents swapped an unnamed child for Sarah Rector at Tuskegee. People around the world believed for over a month, as America's premier black couple believed, that Tuskegee housed, fed, and tutored the "richest colored girl in the world." Except for newspaper articles, no evidence remains to explain how or when the Washingtons realized they had been tricked. The headline in the *Chicago Defender*, written by Emmett Scott, the mastermind behind the Tuskegee Machine, alerted the country that Oklahomans had attacked Tuskegee leaders.

⁴⁰ Black newspapers associated with the Tuskegee Machine ran this article originally published by the *Muskogee Cimeter* (Muskogee), 3 April 1914. See *Chicago Defender* (Illinois), 4 April 1914.

⁴¹ *Washington Bee*, (Washington D.C.), 7 March 1914; *Chicago Defender* (Illinois), 14 February 1914.

If Sarah Rector was not at Tuskegee, and another girl masqueraded in her stead, then there were questions that needed answering by her guardians, the nation, and world from Oklahoma politicians who had control over the guardianship. Had someone killed Rector? Had she been married off to the highest bidder or into the family of her guardian? The banner headline meant that answers needed to be made to a worldwide audience which was watching Oklahoma politics and practices through the lens of the black newspapers.

More information poured out of Oklahoma into the national newspapers about the plight of Indians in Oklahoma. Sarah Rector was not the only mixed-blood black Indian whose story had to be publicized. Zeke Moore was a quite destitute fourteen-year-old Creek freedman. Homeless and hungry, Zeke and his brother Gabe Moore resorted to theft in 1903 in order to survive from day to day. Captured for stealing food Gabe was held in the Muskogee city jail. Less than a week later his brother Zeke followed. Prisons offered free labor for farmers and state auxiliary departments. According to the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, a week after Gabe was jailed; Al Todd placed a reward for \$50 for a \$45 saddle stolen from his porch. Mr. Hendricks, a worker, placed it there, and the next morning it was gone. He suspected the black Indian freedman Zeke Moore of the theft. Following his hunch, Todd, and Hendricks tracked Zeke to a black man's house in Dirty Creek.

Arriving at the shanty the trackers saw the stolen saddle hanging on the porch. Though the black man, Mayberry, denied that Zeke was there, the whites bullied their way into the home, found Moore sleeping, and arrested him. Moore

repeatedly explained to the men that he had traded for the saddle in Muskogee. Pitifully, on the way to jail someone recognized the horse he rode as belonging to the local medical doctor. Five years later Moore, living out his sentence for theft in the Leavenworth penitentiary, was declared the richest man in Oklahoma.⁴² Publicity by newspapers helped prove he was swindled out of his property while a minor in jail. However, while catching grafters in their work and displaying the problems in Oklahoma, black mobilization did not stop the flagrant abuse of Indian blacks. However, their work opened issue to the world during the Progressive Era and at the beginning of World War I.

Melvin Chisum versus Inman Page at Langston, Oklahoma

The concept of the vigilante committee also set the stage for Chisum's attack on Page. The following information is repeated from the original *Tribune* article. No other newspapers disputed the facts about the incidents. When an Afro-Texan girl, Rebecca Johnson, alerted Chisum that Page and his wife's treatment of the poorest socio-economic classes of blacks at the Langston school seemed unacceptable, Chisum willingly put his career as a newspaperman at risk to uncover the truth.

⁴² "Caught With Property: Another of a Gang of Horse Thieves Landed in Jail," *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, (Muskogee, Oklahoma), 5 December 1903; "Case Of Zeke Moore's Disputed Leases will Come Up Before Judge Lawrence Tomorrow," *Muskogee Times-Democrat* (Muskogee), 17 June 1907.

Eleven issues into his publication of the *Tribune* a damning back page article followed: ⁴³

A careful – impartial investigation of conditions at Langston University discloses the fact that the Commonwealth of Oklahoma has been for years being duped and the colored people of the State have been and are being violently wronged, while decency and morality lie prostrate before those giant curses of Christianity, Lust and Greed. . . . The decent self respecting Negroes of this state owe it to themselves to do as we have done, take the time to go to Langston University, look at the dilapidated condition of things, observed the filth in the Mess Hall, in the kitchen the broken and battered furniture, standing here and there in the hall way in the bedrooms. . . . visited the power house noticing that smoke was rising from the coal bin. The coal became ignited by spontaneous combustion and they had not been able to put it out. ⁴⁴

Chisum made a personal, social and political attack against Inman Page.

Chisum did not think Page, as a black leader, was admirably serving his community. Whether the dispute was over Page's lack of support for national black causes remains obscure. Perhaps the attack came because it was Chisum's own payback to Page for the embarrassment surrounding Sarah Rector's swap at Tuskegee. Another interesting point was that Rebecca Johnson from Texas, a girl with his wife's maiden name (chapter 3), also had personal issues with her treatment at the school. Using the newspaper as his weapon, Melvin Chisum mobilized a vicious attack not only on the culprits who stole from and killed innocent Indians but on Oklahoma's black power structure.

He created the *Oklahoma Tribune* newspaper in Oklahoma City. Fourteen months later his articles in the August 15, 1915 and September 1, 1915 editions

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

attacked Page's anti-Bookerite philosophy, Page's treatment of students and his neglect of poor blacks. Because of the vigilante approach Page was fired/resigned in September 1915. Within seven years Dr. Isaac William Young took the position of president or "King on the Hill" establishing his own "bully pulpit" at Langston in 1923. Conversely, there was one very significant incident neither the Bookerites nor Melvin Chisum foresaw. While Melvin Chisum the espionage agent slew the "Giant on University Hill" – Melvin Chisum the "kingmaker" made a king. A young, truck vegetable salesman rose from the streets of Oklahoma City to fight back at Melvin Chisum using Chisum's own confiscated equipment – Roscoe Dunjee. Dunjee wrote "in 1915 the *Black Dispatch* was born with its arms up fighting against Chism [Chisum] and his political associates who were then for the first time in the history of Oklahoma trying to make political football of Langston."⁴⁵ Dunjee was sold Chisum's confiscated equipment when Chisum was run out of town. Perhaps Dunjee forgot about his father's game political football in having Inman Page hired instead of Jefferson Davis Randolph.

New information reveals that the issues and outcome were not as simple as folk historian, Currie Ballard, wrote about a Logan County jury finding the *Tribune* editor, Melvin Chisum, guilty of "libel" for attacking Page.⁴⁶ The fact that Chisum was given unconditional pardon by Governor M.E. Trapp in 1916 for the court ruling opens up the case. A lack of legal documents about Pages' side of the episode leave

⁴⁵ Roscoe Dunjee. "Melvin Chisum former Oklahoma City Newspaperman Gets Views on Oscar De Priest." *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), 2 March 1933.

⁴⁶ Currie Ballard, "Page, Inman Edward," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org, (accessed September 23, 2015).

questions on the exact validity and “political trickery” newspapers mentioned in the court case.⁴⁷ Missing paperwork on the legal proceedings between Chisum and Page (State of Oklahoma) from Logan County archives leads to questions. The original records of the court case shows the criminal libel charge did not stick to Chisum. Only the paperwork for the charges for bail and court costs for Chisum remain in Logan County Court records. Research is hampered because there are no records of the students of the classes in the years Page was president to follow up on the incidents. During the court case all files were turned over to Logan County courts in Guthrie, Oklahoma. They are not accessible. Evidence that remains from the episode is overwhelmingly in favor of Melvin Chisum’s general charges against Inman Page.

To scrutinize this legendary episode in American history is to look at two men fighting for control of black reform in America. Understand that as a leader and educator, Inman Page was a powerful legendary figure in the Progressive Age. Langston had the potential of becoming as great as Tuskegee Institute. Page had his newspapers, businesses, and backers across the country. It comes down to a tale of the two men Inman Page and Melvin Chisum. Inman Page was a professor, ex slave, purported to be the slave-grandson of President John Tyler, the one time president of Lincoln Institute who built a regional college for blacks doing his best to mold and reform black people to succeed against inhumane odds. The other man, Melvin Chisum, worked as a businessman, journalist, and a hero of sorts for “plain people.” As a rising politician, kingmaker, and a race man he attempted to be a watchdog for

⁴⁷ “Chisum Pardoned by Trapp is Re-Arrested,” *Oklahoma Leader* (Guthrie), 7 September 1916.

the poor blacks against the power and energy of the talented tenth and powerful black men who would harm them. Chisum attempted to stop blatant practices of dehumanization of the poor. He was an espionage agent for the Tuskegee Machine, and others who paid him.

In 1914 at the National Business League Convention in Muskogee, Oklahoma, sponsored by Tuskegee Institute, and members of the National Negro Press Association (NNPA) elected Chisum as their president. Newspapermen from over thirty-six states and six other nations respected the position. Newspapermen and women endorsed Chisum as:

... a leader of sturdy initiative, ready resourcefulness and far-seeing vision. He learns of the past, and guides his steps towards the future with wisdom, courage and constructive force. He believes in forward policies and gives earnest support to men and women who seem best fitted to crystalize those policies into actualities.⁴⁸

Chisum found a cause at Langston, or he possibly took out his frustration on not having much influence on the Indians at Langston. Blacks in the newspaper game had a penchant for attacking blacks (chapter 3). It seems Chisum heard that black Oklahomans were not satisfied with the Langston school. Chisum wrote that people knew of activities at the school where Page had such power that but were afraid of his Langston network or the “wonderful political power of the giant of University Hill.” Chisum willingly placed his life and reputation on the line for saving lives of the poor and needy in his “campaign of decency versus Immorality.” He was

⁴⁸ R.W. Thompson, “Short Flight,” *Freeman* (Cincinnati), 22 August 1914.

not an easy man to be fooled by young girls or old men. Chisum stated that his attack was not on Page because of politics as Page continued to tell the community. He pushed the agenda because Chisum wanted people to know what was happening. "From the beginning with us," he wrote, "it was the safety . . .of our race and for that honor we are willing to suffer and if need be, to die."⁴⁹ Perhaps, it Langston's leaning toward supporting the talented tenth educational reform instead of BTW's education and vocations that was the problem.

In 1914 Inman Page was the first president of one of the "leading" Colored Agricultural and Normal Universities in the country at Langston, Oklahoma.⁵⁰ He was born a slave December 29, 1852 in Warrenton, Virginia. After he and his family ran through Union Army lines to freedom he worked in the Freedmen's Bureau under General O.O. Howard. Page was a construction worker in the erection of Howard University. Later he attended the all black Howard University for two years studying industrial education. He then transferred to predominately white Brown University, in Providence Rhode Island. In 1877 Page graduated with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts. Because of his magnificence as a speaker he was elected the class orator in his graduating class. It was the highest honor for one of the only two black Americans in the class. As a consequence of his oration Page was invited to be the only black who taught at Natchez Seminary in Mississippi.

Page married Zelia Ball, a graduate of Wilberforce University. While on their honeymoon in Washington, D. C. Page received a letter from Lincoln Institute in

⁴⁹ *Tribune*, (Oklahoma City), 7 September 1915.

⁵⁰ *Harlow's Weekly*, (Oklahoma City), 3 June 1916.

Missouri. "The letter revealed that the trustees were anxious to make president a man of color who could prove his administrative ability by serving first as vice president."⁵¹ Together he and Zelia moved to Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri. Lincoln Institute was established in 1866 through pension money of black veterans of the 62nd and 65th Regiments of the United States Colored Troops Infantry of the Civil War. Page was the only black faculty member. As soon as he became President Page instituted his own agenda. He replaced the white workforce with Negro teachers who "would serve a greater inspiration to Negro youth" in 1888.⁵²

Page's long time friend, Rev. John Dunjee, was sent by the Baptist Missionary society to Oklahoma Territory in Oklahoma in 1892. He settled in Choctaw just outside of Oklahoma City. Black Townships and cities rose overnight in the Oklahoma Twin Territories. Yet, Oklahoma had no American black leader for its Negro people. Through political connivance his friend Rev. John Dunjee's in 1897 Inman Page had the opportunity to build his own college from scratch in a territory that was ripe with promise for him to develop his own reform movement for Negro Americans.

A series of related incidents led to the establishment of the Colored Agricultural and Normal University in Langston in 1897. According to Oklahoma historians, Willis Brown and Mark Lyons, regents referred to a statement by BTW's

⁵¹ Zella Patterson, *Zella Black Patterson Collection*, Oklahoma Historical Society, Folder 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

Atlanta Exposition speech when pondering Oklahoma's mandate for a black university. They believed in the quote "separate fingers on the same hand." A few months after the *Plessy vs Ferguson* decision, in the summer of 1896, a black female, Cynthia Ware was denied admission to enroll in the Normal School in Edmond (University of Central Oklahoma). "The Territorial legislature now faced with a choice of integrating or creating separate institutions for the races, opted for the later."⁵³ The bill to establish a university at Langston was adopted March 12, 1897.

Oklahoma's Territorial Board of Education did not realize they played "political football" when they hired Page as president. Territorial leaders assumed Page was a Bookerite, giving him "blanket power to act as he saw fitting and proper and in the school's best interest."⁵⁴ The Board of Education meant this to happen under the auspices of BTW's paradigm. The regents recognized the American Black Inman Page for his race and not realizing the depth of education and colleagues Page acquired over the years. Pages' classmates from Brown University "became prominent in the affairs of the nation. . . . politicians, educators, and professional men of the highest rank." At Langston, he would rein as "Giant on the Hill," since Langston was built on a hilltop. As the editor of *Harlow's Weekly* later referred to Page's administration at CA&NU-Langston, that Page was an assimilationist like W.E.B Du Bois. They believed that the talented tenth of the American black race,

⁵³ Willis Brown, and Mark Lyons, *Langston University: Its Historic Socio-Political Circumstances 1897-1986*, (Oklahoma City: Self Published, 2000), 12.

⁵⁴ Zella Patterson, *Langston University: A History*, (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 31. Roscoe Dunjee's father and Randolph planned to get Page into office.

must be separated, trained and guided to lead the masses in race reform.⁵⁵

Education led students to want equality immediately. Sometimes hasty equality caused them to exploit others.

During segregation, the brunt of political power and the power to reform blacks in Oklahoma was centered in the hands of the president of Oklahoma's only state university for blacks at Langston City. By 1914 Page was known as the "Giant on College Hill." Other private black colleges survived in black communities in Oklahoma, however, the legislature and governor spoke directly to the President of the state university, Langston, for a vision of reform for the two percent of the population in Oklahoma, which was black. When Page came to Oklahoma there was no set pattern for black reform. Page planned a system at Langston.⁵⁶

In the early years Page felt the avenues that offered the greatest inducements were those of farmers, stock raisers, blacksmiths and carpenters.⁵⁷ Langston was no big city in 1897 when Page came to the Twin Territories. Other than the Catholic Church, the best building Langston City had to offer was the Presbyterian Church that was little more than a frame house. At its inception in 1891 whites, blacks, and Indians lived in Langston. When a white man named, Coyle was refused the building of a business in Langston, he arranged for the railroad to go three miles east of Langston City, and all the white families followed him to establish the city of Coyle.

⁵⁵ W.E.B. DuBois, "The Talented Tenth," from *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of To-day* (New York, 1903). Information on Page's background from the *Plaindealer* (Kansas), 26 March 1911.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Zella Black Patterson Collection, Historical Society, folder 3, 25.

It became an all white community and Langston an all black town. The college started in a wood framed church building donated by the community. Page and the faculty he hired rode on horses and horse drawn buggies, surreys, gathering students and funds throughout the state. When Page was hired the school was more an idea than an actual place. "In the early years residents who helped found the university had "paternalistic interest in its development."

Oklahoma City's black politics covered a forty-mile radius from Oklahoma City to Langston. While African American life in Tulsa, Oklahoma, centered on an upcoming "Black Wall Street," a black enterprise compared to the financial district of New York – blacks in Oklahoma City were "sleeping in Oklahoma City, unthoughtful, unprepared for tomorrow, disorganized and confused."⁵⁸ Their center was Langston. As he had in Missouri, Page learned to use the state legislature to his advantage. He continued his political expertise in his position in Oklahoma. He gradually worked with lawmakers in the state capital in Guthrie, Oklahoma until he got new buildings and support for the growing university at Langston. Three students from out of state, Nolan Prytle, Mary Prytle and Thomas Slaughter all of Ohio were the first to receive Bachelor of Science degrees from the University. Page increased university land holdings from forty acres to three hundred. In his administration the school built Phyllis Wheatley Hall, a dorm for women, Marquess Hall for men, the first president's residence was built and a fully equipped industrial plant. The school went from heating with coal to steam, added a library, a

⁵⁸ *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 21 September 1917.

farmhouse, a museum, dairy barn and infirmary. The faculty increased from four professors to thirty-five.

For seventeen years Page's power over political, social and economic reform in Oklahoma was comparable only to that of Booker T. Washington's power for reform nationally. Under Page's guidance the university formed his leadership class to think of themselves as "the talented tenth." As their influence grew from Langston in the first quarter of the twentieth century, this group wrestled political patronage positions from blue-collar workers, controlled the developing schools and managed postal positions around the state.⁵⁹ A failing farm economy drew people from rural areas into the Oklahoma City Area. Instead of the talented tenth being leaders of the growing masses of illiterate poor in Langston and Oklahoma City, the talented tenth began to despise, and reject them in hopes of uniting with whites.

These upwardly mobile blacks argued that the uncultured of their race kept the talented from reaching their goals in race relations, prosperity in housing and acceptance by whites.⁶⁰ The points that Melvin Chisum would persecute Page with start with this agenda. In order to get the right blacks in place Chisum believed that Page denied the poorest blacks a niche for upward mobility and used some blacks as stepping stones during a time when social relations with whites was changing for the better. Chisum believed that he used them as pawns.⁶¹ Over the seventeen-year

⁵⁹ Roscoe Dunjee, "Regents Appointed," *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), 18 April 1919. In his editorial, he stated blue-collar workers were the wrong "sort" of blacks to work with whites.

⁶⁰ *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 18 April 1919.

⁶¹ *Tribune*, (Oklahoma City), 15 August 1915.

period at Langston, like at Lincoln University, Page faced political and social obstacles.

As the educated community grew around them, indications of inner racial conflict came first from within the community at Langston City with the formation of a new educated middle class. At the inception of Langston University, the city that donated the land community had “strong rapport” with Page and his ideas. However, a separation occurred as “bitter resentment” of the old settlers at being “left out” of college “activities and affairs” as Page’s talented tenth group came of age.⁶² By 1903 citizens from Langston City wanted Page fired. At his reappointment some people in the Langston City community burned public property in anguish and protest. However, Page had a “strong backbone” and fought to bring a change to the black communities in Oklahoma particularly in Langston. Page continually put up a “stiff fight” against locals who did not want change and others who were ambitious to succeed him.⁶³ Theo Braughman wrote in April 1915, that during his seventeen years Page “did not have the co-operation of some of our people that he is entitled to and many little knockers have tried to impede his progress; but he has been equal in emergency and having right on his side successfully marched on.”⁶⁴ The idea that Democrats attempted to trap him appeared in newspaper reports but little can be found to support for the argument.

⁶² Mozelle C. Hill and Thelma D. Ackiss, “Culture of a Contemporary All-Negro Community, (Langston: Langston University, 1943), 8.

⁶³ *Oklahoma State Register*, (Guthrie), 22 July 1915.

⁶⁴ Theo Baughman, “Along the Color Line,” *Topeka Plaindealer* (Kansas), 16 April 1915.

Did Chisum have a plan prior to coming to Oklahoma against the “Giant on University Hill?” In code Theo Baughman wrote in June of 1915.

The numerous friends of Prof. Inman E. Page regret to note that the waters have been made muddy and at this writing things do not look very rosate [sic] for him being at the head of Langston college longer. The wise ones have it that a commission has been appointed to study Tuskegee methods. Whoever is appointed to fill his place will certainly have to not be a “Snipe.” It seems that mayor John R. Hogan of Langston teacher of History at Langston college is the biggest in Oklahoma and what he cannot do, with the powers that be is because Bro. Hogan doesn’t care to do it. Catch me Steve? This old timer received his political training down in Texas and he’s most likely to put one over at most any old time.⁶⁵

Chisum must have known that the dilapidated premises at the black college were a product of Jim Crow politics. The cause was the racism inherent in segregation politics of the Progressive Age, not just in Page’s lack of organizational skills. Oklahoma’s only black university lacked equitable funding by the Board of Education and Legislature of Oklahoma. Appropriations for the CA&NU were one quarter of those of the Agricultural and Mechanical College at Stillwater (OSU). Yet, all blacks could only attend the one segregated school in Oklahoma. The other more comparable white normal schools at Edmond, Alva, Ada, Weatherford, Durant and Northeastern Oklahoma were all allocated more than the one black university.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Theo Baughman, Special Scribe, “Business with Colored People on Firm Foundation Oklahoma,” 18 June 1915.

⁶⁶ Session Laws of the State of Oklahoma Passed by the Regular Session of the Ninth Legislature of Oklahoma, Harlow Publishing Company, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Speech J. Wilson Pettus, “Problems of the Negro Schools,” Delivered by J. Wilson Pettus before County Teachers Association, Stillwater, March 1923, *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 5 April, 1923. The white schools had seventy-seven county superintendents, a state supervisor, and three assistants. The black schools had

Less than one thousand dollars was allocated for support and maintenance other than salaries. Racial segregation allowed for discrimination in school expenditures.

The long drawn out court fight between Chisum and Page would be one of the dirtiest in the history of Oklahoma.⁶⁷ Page charged Chisum with criminal libel because of the attack on his wife's and his own reputation in the August 20, 1915 issue and information in the September 1 issue. Page fought Chisum with the charge of libel that "was a weapon in the intense war within the American black race for political and social dominance."⁶⁸ BTW had used the legal system against Trotter and others who wrote inflammatory words about the black leader in black newspapers.⁶⁹ Chisum reported that Page allowed state teachers exam questions to be opened earlier than scheduled and studied prior to testing for his students to keep up with white student's scores.⁷⁰ There is no question that Chisum knew the legal risk of being jailed for "criminal libel" in attacking Inman Page through the *Tribune* newspaper. On September 16, 1914 the district Attorney in Washington

none. "When the rural Negro child enters his classroom, he is brought face to face with wanton penury, niggardliness, repulsive surroundings, and in many instances gross in competency, as part of teachers for children of today are not the fools we once were. Many of them in disgust quit school rather than endure the gloom and monotony of their school surroundings." In 1915 the state of black schools in Oklahoma was a disgrace. The Oklahoma budget for education even in 1920 was \$22,826,481. Of this sum whites received \$22,028,000; blacks received \$798,431. For every white child of school age in the state, \$31.50 was expended for every black child \$14.05. Of the total expended, the whites received 96.5% and the black 3.5%. In other words two and one half time as much was spent to educate the white child as was being spent to educate the black child.

⁶⁷ *Oklahoma State Register*, (Oklahoma City), 9 March 1916.

⁶⁸ Stephen Fox, *The Guardian of Boston, William Monroe Trotter*, (New York: Athenaeum, 1970). ⁶⁸ *Harlow's Weekly* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), 2 October 1915.

⁶⁹ Stephen Fox, *The Guardian of Boston*, 54, 55.

⁷⁰ "The Law and Examinations," *Tribune* (Oklahoma City), 20 August 1915.

D.C., “struck a telling blow for clean journalism in the nation’s capital” when an editorial in a “local sheet,” perhaps the *Sun* newspaper, published negative personal information on black Citizens of the city. The outcome was:

Men and women in the public life may expect criticism of course. It must be presented on lines of decency and devoid of malice and unjustifiable assaults on their character or integrity. The private affairs of people are sacred and the law does well to protect them against vandals and vampires who seek to frighten the timorous and play cheap their fears for financial profit or to accomplish a malicious purpose.⁷¹

The outcome of the incident was “a similar outrage perpetrated against any first-class man or woman in this town will lead to proceedings in criminal libel or prosecuted under the corrupt practices act. We are approaching the beginning of the end of dirty journalism in this long –suffering town.⁷² Chisum interviewed both the editor of the *Sun*, T. Thomas Fortune, and associate editor on the week of October 3, 1914. Thus, he knew beforehand the risks he was taking in Oklahoma.

Chisum did not stop his inflammatory work. The September 1, 1915 issue of the *Tribune*, insinuated that Page flimflammed the legislature and insinuated that he prepared the poorer college girls for prostitution. A short editorial revealed Page was a follower in educational training of DuBois and not BTW. In June of 1914 BTW appointed a commission to study Tuskegee methods in the Land Grant colleges. Langston fell into this category. Inman Page knew the weather was changing.

⁷¹ R.W. Thompson, *Freeman* (Illinois), 3 October 1914.

⁷² *Ibid.*

The episode of Chisum's vicious attack against Page leaves overarching questions unanswered. Why would a national leader such as Chisum, just elected president of the most important black newspaper fraternity in the country, risk his reputation, his position as a government efficiency agent, by presenting a lie to the world? According to other sources he was not a vindictive man. He was about "Service, Service, Service" to the poor and needy. During this period of the trial he was risking his life moving poor southerners north to Ohio and New Jersey. Why is it so important for historians to make Oklahoma history so one dimensional, without rifts, and problems among blacks? Reconstructing evidence of the time period, with new sources including the only remaining set of the Oklahoma *Tribune* newspapers, shows Chisum's attack on Page was a way of demanding reform for education for the poor blacks in Oklahoma.

Since Inman Page had served for seventeen years as the first president of Langston, Oklahomans rallied around him –whether the articles were true or not.⁷³ His newspaper friends helped him but his backers from other states and his college alumni remained quiet. The year 1915 *The Cleveland Gazette*, *The Topeka Plaindealer* and other non-Bookerite newspapers carried special stories on how well Page was succeeding at the Langston campus. However, he did not keep his position at Langston. His leave came after the September 1 issue of the *Tribune*. The day Page left, the state Board of Education took charge of the school. Less than a week after their investigation, instead of reinstating Page, Professor I. W. McCutcheon,

⁷³ *Oklahoma Guide*, (Oklahoma City), 9 September 1915; *Guthrie Leader* (Oklahoma City), 14 November 1915; *Oklahoma Guide* (Oklahoma City), 21 October 1915; *Oklahoma Guide*, (Oklahoma City) 7 October 1915.

former principal of the black schools at Atoka, was named his successor. Mrs. E. E. McDaniel was appointed as chaperone, companion, confidential friend, and matron for the girls of the university.⁷⁴

As predicted by Chisum's editorial the mechanical building burned to the ground.⁷⁵ According to Smitherman of the *Tulsa Star* the appointment of McCutcheon came as a shock to "leading colored people of the state."⁷⁶ This was so not because they wanted Page back but they wanted someone from the outside of Oklahoma with better qualifications at Langston. Page was led to believe that he could have his position again if he had Chisum imprisoned.⁷⁷ Someone played had lied to him.

Several Oklahoma papers reported Page's departure as a resignation. Their reports offered divergent accounts of the situation. The *Guthrie Daily* leader

⁷⁴ "Popular McAlester Woman Chaperons Langston Girls," *Muskogee Star* (Muskogee), 23 October 1915.

⁷⁵ "Langston University Mechanical Building Burned," *Oklahoma Guide* (Oklahoma City), 6 September 1915.

⁷⁶ "Father of Langston University Resigns: Serious Charges Brought Up Against man who started The School 17 years Ago: Appointment of Atoka Man Comes as Surprise," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 3 September 1915. Smitherman's reference probably does not represent Page's supporters. He was member of Chisum's National Negro Press Association. Politics may have been at play. Smitherman was the leader of the Democrats from 1917 until Young stepped in in 1919.

⁷⁷ "Page will Stay In Langston," *Oklahoma Guide*, (Oklahoma City), 10 September 1915. See also *State of Oklahoma versus Melvin Chisum*, Answer, March 24, 1916, E.I. Saddler Attorney. The brief told that everyone thought if Chisum was incarcerated that Page would get his position back at Langston. Taking a closer look at the black political scene in Oklahoma in 1915-1917 -- the dense community of African Americans represented about eight percent of the total population. In 1910, 26.9 percent of Oklahoma Negroes lived in towns and cities after the end of the war and into the early 1920s the percentage rose to approximately thirty-two point percent. Census reports of 1910 showed that in eleven point six per cent of the urban population of Oklahoma was African American.

reported: "Page resigned of his own volition stating that he was sick and tired of combating the continual attacks made on him by political enemies of his own race and in his own school."⁷⁸ The *Tulsa Star* reported that Page was under grave charges and that he "resigned to avoid a deal of unpleasant notoriety."⁷⁹ Chisum's ordeal was not over. Washington was dying. The Tuskegee Machine was in shambles. The political and judicial systems of Oklahoma rallied behind Inman Page. A court date was set for Graham, Chisum's printer, who was accused of asking Page for four hundred dollars "hush money" to destroy the papers or "suppress" the article.⁸⁰ He was arrested and charged with attempted extortion.⁸¹

Law officials from several counties wove a net around Chisum. If he entered their counties, he would be prosecuted in some way related to the case of criminal libel.⁸² The *Guthrie Leader* reported that Okmulgee lawyer, Dave Wallace, and the county attorney of Cleveland County had charges against Chisum of subordination of perjury and outstanding bonds. No records of any charges against Chisum are in the files of these courts. Instead these men sent signals to Chisum that he was not going to run away. The *Guthrie Daily Leader* was pro-Page in reporting information about

⁷⁸ "Negro School Head Resigns; Will Prosecute: President Inman Page Will Now Go After Enemies Who Persecuted," *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 1 September 1915.

⁷⁹ "Father of Langston University Resigns: Serious Charges Brought Up Against Man Who started The School 17 years Ago: Appointment of Atoka Man Comes as Surprise," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 3 September 1915.

⁸⁰ "Guthrie Negro is Charged With Attempt to Extort," *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 9 September 1915.

⁸¹ "Negro School Head Resigns; Will Prosecute," *Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie), 1 September 1915. "Serious Charges Brought Up Against Man Who Started the School 17 Years Ago: Appointment of Atoka Man Comes as Surprise," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 3 September 1915.

⁸² *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 1 September 1915.

the suit. "Chisum is Bad Risk: Wanted Elsewhere" headlined a story that was completely fictitious.⁸³ The paper printed several other pro-Page articles. According to John C. Leftwich, editor of the *Western World* Newspaper, published in Kingfisher for the Oklahoma community "the Territory Claims Page as her own."⁸⁴

The trial started out in a bizarre way. Chisum was in Dallas, Texas, collecting money from his uncle for his defense on the morning of October 28, when his trial started. He sent a telegram to his lawyer, E.I. Saddler, informing Saddler that he missed his train. He planned on reaching Oklahoma at five in the evening. Chisum's trial continued until the evening. Meanwhile, approximately one hundred and five people showed up in the Guthrie court to witness the trial. When Chisum did not arrive in time, the judge turned to the Graham case. As the case for Graham started, a fight broke out between the two lawyers. Moorman (Moman) Pruiett of Oklahoma City attempted to intimidate E. I. Saddler of Guthrie.

Pruiett was known for his theatrics in a courtroom. The Chisum-Graham trial would be no different. Pruiett was an "ex-convict and moral and mental pervert . . . was just as liable to punctuate a point with a bullet as an epigram."⁸⁵ Pruiett was usually called for questionable cases that needed unethical skill. It was highly unusual for him to step into a trial between two black people. Page hired a man who "vouched for persons charged with fiendish crimes when the evidence of their guilt

⁸³ "Negro School Head Resigns; Will Prosecute," *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 1 September 1915.

⁸⁴ *Western World Newspaper* (Shawnee), 9 December 1915.

⁸⁵ Berry, *He Made It Safe to Murder*, 14.

was overwhelming.”⁸⁶ Pruiett began the trial by attempting to intimidate the black lawyer, E. I. Saddler, a Bookerite, by brandishing a Barlow knife at him.⁸⁷ As he walked towards Saddler, Pruiett ran his thumb along the blade saying, “Fellow, right here and now I’m going to cut out your black spotted Nigger heart!”⁸⁸

Saddler was not theatrical. He was a laborer who also practiced law. Saddler whisked out a Mexican Moocha blade and said, “Let him come; I call his bet.” People in the audience ripped out knives of their own in the midst of the courtroom.⁸⁹ There was a swish as the over one hundred by standers in the courtroom pulled out their knives. Before anything could happen Pruiett asked, “Isn’t anybody going to hold me?” At this point the sheriff and deputies stepped in to stop the ruckus.⁹⁰ Saddler was dubbed the only man from whom Pruit ever backed away.

After deliberations Graham faced a hung jury and Chisum was fined one thousand dollars for not appearing in court. A new court date was set. Chisum arrived on Friday morning at 5 a.m. Before Chisum could get to the courthouse, students from Langston who spied on him told the sheriff Chisum had arrived in

⁸⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁸⁷ “Pruett Seeks to Carve out Heart in Court: Tense moment in Graham Trial When Ugly Knives Flash,” *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 29 October 1915. Information had to be trumped up because there is no record of Chisum in Okmulgee or Cleveland County files for arrests or in a court case.

⁸⁸ Berry, *He Made It Safe to Murder*, 11.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁰ “Pruitt Seeks to Carve out Heart in Court: Tense moment in Graham Trial When Ugly Knives Flash,” *Guthrie Daily Leader*, (Guthrie), 29 October 1915. There is no record of Melvin Chisum in Okmulgee or Cleveland County files for arrests or in a court case during this period.

town. The sheriff locked him in the back of the jail.⁹¹ The action was in violation of the court rules but few people knew about the incident. It seemed just pay back for his work against Page. "He [Chisum] was put in jail to satisfy the prosecuting witness, who had been told that unless he [Page] had Chisum put into the penitentiary that he would lose his job at Langston."⁹² Chisum had no access to his lawyer or officers of the court for days. He was fined another two thousand dollars.

Chisum's trial was continued until March 16, 1916. Swank represented Page. Two newspapers reported only that Chisum was fined and released pending appeals. After a ten-day-trial he was fined two hundred and fifty dollars. He had over five thousand dollars outstanding in bonds. No jail sentence was given. Trial records do not exist that substantiate the criminal libel charge. Chisum sought new trials but no judge allowed him to forfeiture of the bonds. Chisum tried to escape Oklahoma. He booked a ticket on the Rock Island Train. William Harrison, a spy for Page and covert friend to Chisum, told the authorities that Chisum was taking the Rock Island Train on Tuesday night April 4, 1916 at 9:30. When Chisum realized the sheriff was after him, he jumped from the moving train into the local yards. "Deputy Sheriff Fate Sanders, after a short sprint, recaptured the Negro."⁹³

Perhaps the anti-Chisum newspapers were hostile because of the work he did dealing with the Indian agenda, and as well they could have been supporters of

⁹¹ Incident report from files of District Court of Logan County, State of Oklahoma versus Melvin Chisum, M. W. Wright, J.W. Conrad, 1916. No longer accessible as of July 2018 in Logan County files. A copy from research in 1999 exists in author's files.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Chisum Makes Leap for Freedom: Captured," *Guthrie Leader*, (Guthrie), 6 April 1916.

Inman Page. They posted false data such as Chisum was wanted for not having paid his two hundred dollar fine. However, Chisum did not have to pay because of the pending appeal. Technically he could have left town. However, he ran because he feared for his life. He had Langston University students, Pages' friends and supporters, and policemen all over the state who were upset with his reports about policemen and sheriff's departments participating in a prostitution ring from Guthrie to Tulsa. Chisum was arrested once more, booked, and charged bail. After being freed the last time by his lawyer, Chisum did not go back by train but by trail. He made the long arduous trip from Guthrie to Muskogee on horseback. There he met friends and caught a train out of Oklahoma. His last trial for the bonds was in May of 1917. When he got off the train he was put into jail. The charge was that he had to pay outstanding bonds of two thousand dollars within ninety days. Finally, Governor M. E. Trapp, gave Chisum unconditional pardon. The defendant was released from jail the grips of Oklahoma lawmen. He left Guthrie like Paul and Silas left Derbe – very quickly.

Inman Page left Oklahoma for a while but would return in the 1920s to run Oklahoma City black schools. J. Smitherman a Democratic leader and editor of the *Star* newspaper in Tulsa questioned Page's motives for resigning and leaving Langston. "If the charges were true Mr. Page did the right thing to resign; if they were not true why should he resign?"⁹⁴ However *Harlow's Weekly*, the politically savvy, newspaper, and a mainstay of white Oklahomans, explained Page had a termination – not a resignation. That was the reason he left Langston.

⁹⁴ "Langston Uprising," *Tulsa Star* (Tulsa), 17 September 1915.

Perhaps, it was the Chisum's time to spread his wings, leave the shadow of BTW. Chisum wrote to BTW explaining the conditions at Langston, and his response to the situation in the manner of an humble servant. His tone changed from servility to equality; to a report from a colleague. Chisum's final letter to BTW – located in the Booker T Washington Papers in the Library of Congress now – was dated November 10, 1915. Booker T. Washington may have never read it. He died on November 14, 1915.⁹⁵ Emmett Scott probably packed it away as he did Norris Wright Cuney's files. One only wonders what he disposed from the Booker T. Washington Collection.

⁹⁵ Louis Harlan Papers, University of Maryland College Park Maryland, Harlan Papers, unprocessed collection, Box 39. Melvin Chisum to Booker T. Washington, 10 November 1915.

CHAPTER VI

SERVICE, SERVICE, SERVICE: CHISUM IN THE 1920s

“This writer has been in the business of exposing scheming grafters, highbinders and moral reprobates for more than 20 years. This writer has been sued 14 times for libel by this same litter of rats and he has never done a day in any penitentiary for his exposing of the vast crowd of fakers in eight different states.”¹

--- Melvin Chisum Sr. *Pittsburg Courier Newspaper*

It is still impossible, with all the digitized documents and established manuscript collections, to find out about Melvin Chisum, Sr.'s, fourteen lawsuits and work of “exposing his vast crowd of fakers in eight different states [United States].” However, there are enough primary sources to verify his claim for exposing fakers in Oklahoma, Alabama, and Chicago. The list includes Inman Page (1853-1935), at Langston University, who sued Chisum for libel. He may have included exposing William Monroe Trotter (1872-1934) in Boston for Booker T. Washington and his work against the national Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) when it was still the Niagara Movement. ² It could also include

¹ Melvin Chisum, *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 12 April 1924.

² Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*. 44-47.

the Oklahoma grafters who stole from the Afro Indians, chapter 5, “Chisum in Oklahoma,” and the proposed libel lawsuit against Chisum by Robert Mays in Chicago in 1925.¹ Chisum was not an easy individual to classify or understand in his own time much less now in the twenty-first century. Percival Prattis’ description that referenced the word “operators” established a clue.² For Chisum, a man doing missions and commissions for pay, the label an “operator” in the underworld could have been a hit man for a gangster, mob boss, businessman or rescuer of a man’s son from a bad love affair. This chapter looks at the second half of the first quarter of the twentieth century growth of Melvin Chisum, Sr., in politics, family life, personal entrepreneurial endeavors, and shows how his work in the teens added to the structure of the American Black Civil Religion making Chisum a hero to those that followed his antics. It develops a lens to interpret his ability to collect black votes across the country, thus making him a potential politician to be noticed and used by New Deal Democrats in the 1930s.

Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., who never believed his father was actually a spy until this research revealed documentation, explained, “Dad described himself as ‘an efficiency expert.’ I learned this to mean that if someone wanted to get something done and did not know how to do it he was your man. This was because he knew the

¹ John Hope Franklin, *My Life and Era the Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). 53. Buck Franklin described his understanding of Chisum’s work to remove Inman Page. Also the research is covered in a conference paper; see Cecelia Brooks, “Skeletons in the Closet: At What Cost? Hearing the Call for Help When African American Leaders Oppressed Their Own 1914-1915,” in *Association for the Study of African American Life and History*, ed. Tracie Mayes Stewart (Atlanta, Georgia, 2015).

² Louis Harlan Papers, University of Maryland College Park Maryland, Harlan Papers, unprocessed collection, Box 39, (Hereafter cited as Harlan Papers.)

people or person who had to be persuaded to co-operate in your endeavor, he knew how to approach them with your problem and how to convince them to do what you wanted done. He had the 'know how.' He was a most unique individual. In accomplishing his ends, he ruffled many feathers as you have seen."³ When asked why he thought his father never told his children about his work as a spy and provocateur, Dr. Chisum, dark, charismatic, with twinkling eyes like his father, took time to think, and admitted, he did not know.

Several pivotal moments prior to the 1920s refined the "Texas Steel" to become a detective and politician of worth. First, when Robert Russa Moton became principal of Tuskegee Institute, after Booker T. Washington (BTW) died, Moton allowed Chisum to support his administration as more than a spy, but as Moton's political backers and philanthropist knew, Chisum helped him lead the powerful, politically – situated university. Chisum's work for the Department of Labor's U.S. Employment Service Division of Negro Economics during World War I fits this paradigm.

While Louis Harlan portrayed Chisum and BTW as close, friendly, gangsters, the sitting on benches developing plans to foil their foes was true: however, the perception that they were personal buddies would be a long way from correct. Chisum's letters chosen for the Harlan's, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, pulled out and sorted along with those not published, shows Chisum, as a neophyte always

³ Dr. Melvin Chisum to author 23 June 2005, Melvin Chisum Papers in the Leonelle Young Hargrove Collection, Archives and Special Collections, Delaney-Brown Library, Oklahoma City University. Hereafter cited as OKCU.

longing to please or be an “humble servant” not only to his master but to BTW as a world renown master. People from India, Africa and other continents also reached out to BTW for advice. Early on the researcher or interpreter sees that it was Emmett Scott who hired, associated with Chisum, and helped Chisum and BTW trust each other. Scott introduced Chisum as useful because he knew Chisum’s potential. Following the letters in volume seven of Booker T. Washington Papers, the sequence shows that Chisum’s newspaper was being used by Scott at least a month before BTW asked about who Melvin Chisum was and checked his background.⁴

Harlan misleads the reader by relegating Chisum as a lieutenant of Tuskegee during the BTW years. Before Moton became principal the Tuskegee under Emmett Scott, BTW did not support Chisum’s personal ventures. While Chisum may have acted as if he was BTW denied Chisum’s presence as a Tuskegee “man.” Harlan did have some resemblance of truth when he wrote that after 1906 the master did not rub the lamp for Chisum to dance to his tune. However, by then Chisum separated himself from the community to seek his own entrepreneurial endeavors. Because Chisum was self-employed as a detective, real estate agent, bodyguard, among other positions, the Tuskegee Machine paid only a portion of his income. He was always looking for more missions. During the Progressive Era he found lucrative startups. According to a letter written to BTW, three years went by before Chisum saw Washington and Scott or ventured to Tuskegee. Chisum distanced himself from the Tuskegee Machine for three years between 1907 and 1910 he did not go to Alabama

⁴ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, 7. 219 -228.

or follow BTW's network.⁵ In that time he proved Scott's description of him in 1903 as "not a brainy man" as an incorrect evaluation. Though not always successful Chisum continued his real estate venture, started newspapers, and banks without the support of the Tuskegee Machine. He did however use his link to them for introductions. It is possible that Chisum learned of the duplicity of the Tuskegee Machine in regards to him. His boyhood friend from Texas, Emmett Scott, remained Chisum's dear friend and he continued to offer his work to BTW for investigations. But something changed between them, or perhaps it was in the reports of their relationship in historiographical records that blinds researchers to certain crucial facts. Scott destroyed his records. Chisum's archives continue to be built.

Chisum and Scott differed, not only in looks but also in calling. Chapter three introduced Chisum and his Methodist colleagues I. W. Young, Emmett Scott, and Jack Johnson. Johnson and Chisum take the ideology set by Sojourner Truth of always taking risks and positions anti-establishment while Young and Scott leaned toward John Garraty's *New Commonwealth*. While there is no indication in writings, perhaps skin color made the difference. Young and Scott gained understood they had upward mobility because of their light complexions. While Chisum and Johnson could pull off antics with lower classes of blacks; Young and Scott could deal with those who felt skin color meant they were more a part of the white community. Chisum and Johnson were dark, sturdily built, black men, while Scott and Young were more mixed with the yellowness in the skin associated with Anglo bloodlines. Whereas, Chisum was altruistic in the black community Scott was dedicated to

⁵ Melvin Chisum to Booker T. Washington 28 July 1913. Box 42. Harlan Papers.

becoming a wealthy capitalist rather than being self-sacrificing for the race.⁶ Chisum and Johnson strayed from organized religion as adults for the Christology of the black social gospel, they associated more with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Young and Scott were mainline churchmen. The Methodist Episcopal Church (North) remained their base for social and political needs.⁷ Much of Young's climb to fame in Oklahoma came from white church members who supported his politics.⁸ His church was mainline and the only difference in their service at Quayle and Saint Luke UMC in Oklahoma City was the color of the people.⁹ Young tended to move between worlds when it was necessary to gain the vote. He was Machiavellian. Young carried the mantle of BTW to maintain his façade to the white leadership of Oklahoma.¹⁰

Another Look At Emmett Scott

Looking at Scott's relationship to the black social gospel, his work is more related to the social gospel as expounded in John Garraty's *The New Commonwealth*,

⁶ Dailey. *When the Saints Come Hobblin In*. 178-180.

⁷ Brooks, "Oklahoma's First Black Governor," 37-40. When Dr. Young fought for liberties for blacks in Oklahoma the Methodist Church supported him. Anglo members in St. Luke's Methodist Church in Oklahoma City had him hired at the YMCA and supported his work in the black hospital. Before the division of black and white into the Methodist Church in the 1930s Young sat on the Board of Education in the 1904 General Conference as a delegate and also in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁸ Ibid., 37-39.

⁹ Interview Erma Threatt and Author, 3 April 1999, OKCU.

¹⁰ Brooks, "Oklahoma's First Black Governor," 45.

or Ralph Luker's, *The Gospel in Black and White*.¹¹ Scott did not sacrifice goals for himself even for his long – time friend whom he considered honorable but was not very brainy.¹² It seems Chisum had to prove himself to Scott but Scott never let him into the nest egg at Tuskegee. However, after BTW died, Chisum shared the accomplishments of Scott's progress.¹³ Perhaps part of the reason BTW had to meet with Chisum on benches was to bypass the evasiveness of Scott; however, without a written record that information may never be known. What can be seen in several episodes recorded in the Harlan collection and Maceo Crenshaw's book, *When the Saints Go Hobblin In*, that Scott took care of his own coffers first but Chisum eventually became a closer colleague after Scott left Tuskegee.¹⁴

According to letters between Chisum and Scott Chisum took on the financial burden of producing a newspaper, the *Impending Conflict*. He used it to aid BTW by stopping Bruce Grits' criticism of the black leader. However, Chisum held the burden of reimbursing subscribers when the paper collapsed. Afterwards, Chisum had board members, Fred Moore, and Rev. Chas Morris, F. H. Gilbert among others supporters, willing to revive the paper under a new name, which would have alleviated Chisum's financial problems. Moore wrote in a letter unpublished in the Booker T. Washington Papers that "I am of the opinion that...this can be put into

¹¹ In chapter two, a description of the black gospel narrative was given with comparisons of American –European social gospel and the black social gospel.

¹² Emmett Scott to Booker T. Washington 28 July 1903, Harlan Papers, Box 41, University of Maryland, College Park Maryland. (Hereafter cited as Harlan Papers.)

¹³ The Negro Economics Job in WWI and the Sun Shipbuilding position in the 1930s were both gotten through Scott's influence.

¹⁴ After decades, the Scott manuscript collection is still not accessible at Morgan State University. See Dailey. *When the Saints Go Hobblin In*, 178-80.

operation and made a success . . .”¹⁵ However, Scott denied their effort of help to Chisum. He planned to secure his own needs. His response to Moore was no he would not help Chisum. “I have just entered into an agreement to serve as Associate Editor on a new publication.” Scott did not want to work with a newspaper over a long distance, and because of a “substantial increase in salary that January” he made the decision to stay at Tuskegee instead of seeking other employment. He had plans for growing wealthy at Tuskegee University. He advised his friend, “Surely there must be room for more than one at a place like this where there are so many opportunities for service.”¹⁶

Several letters of inquiries came to Scott asking for letters of reference about Chisum. While Chisum had a letter of reference he used from Tuskegee to show perspective supporters, continually BTW’s or Scott’s decision was not to support Chisum personal entrepreneurial adventures. They redirected requests for giving Chisum money to giving the money to Tuskegee University. BTW stated that all matters of endorsements concerning money should come through him and not go to others without his approval.¹⁷ Consequently, because of a lack of endorsements from the Tuskegee Machine, it took Chisum four years to repay the subscribers of the *Impending Conflict* for unfulfilled subscriptions. Harlan wrote the newspaper had been a straw man for the Tuskegee Machine; instead it was Chisum’s personal financial burden. He fretted about having his name tarnished. Chisum did not

¹⁵ Fred R. Moore to E. J. Scott, 8 December 1903. Box 41. Harlan Papers

¹⁶ E. J. Scott to Fred Moore 14 December 1903. Box 41. Harlan Papers.

¹⁷ Ellen Collins to Booker T. Washington 26 November 1903. Box 41. Harlan Papers. Booker T. Washington to Ellen Collins 2 December 1903. Box 41. Harlan Papers.

become an open member of the Tuskegee Machine under BTW and Scott. Perhaps the reason was that a close relationship with Chisum would have exposed the espionage Chisum did for them earlier in his career and they did not want the Tuskegee Machine name tarnished.

Chisum and his brother William developed a successful real estate business in New York called "Chisum Brothers." They rented apartments, found people positions in hotels, and were caretakers for apartment complexes. As the real estate market for blacks boomed during the great migration, they branched out by working with several other black businessmen and clergy in forming the Greater Northern Realty Company. Scott sat on the board of a competing company in New York, the Afro-American Realty Company. It was associated with the Tuskegee Machine.

After a decline in the housing market, combined with the death of Chisum's business partner, and contractor in a car accident, Chisum as the director of the "Greater Northern Realty Company" was personally sued by his investors. This time Chisum sought the assistance of white philanthropists and Ellen Collins of New York. Collins was linked to Tuskegee. Going further outside of the Tuskegee Machine, Chisum found white philanthropists, William Buckley Sr. (1881-1958) and George Peabody (1847-1936) to aid him. Having witnessed "his honesty, persistence and ability to gather large numbers of people for their benefit" Buckley and Peabody bailed him out. However, Ellen Collins sent a letter to Tuskegee asking for references about Chisum and about his character. The letter revealed two things. First this was not the first time Ellen contacted the Tuskegee Machine to inquire

about Chisum. Secondly, when Chisum desperately needed money Tuskegee chose not to support his efforts. The first letters from Ellen were in 1903. The Tuskegee Machine responded to Ellen “to keep clear of him [Chisum]. As far as I can recollect his name was Negro.”¹⁸ Ellen repeated this information in her 1908 letter to Tuskegee. But there was no letter in response in the Harlan files.

Scott and BTW knew Chisum desperately needed cash because he had recently paid his debts to *Impending Conflict* subscribers. They had letters from him and the information of Chisum’s successful repayment to all his subscribers was printed in newspapers. Knowing Chisum was in dire need of his money when wrote for his pay – a mission of gathering over 100 names of people in secret societies – the Tuskegee Machine attempted to default on the much-needed payments for services.¹⁹ Perhaps they too lacked money. Perhaps there was a break down in communications. Whatever the reason Chisum had to pick himself up by his own bootstraps. Overall, the letters in the Harlan collection that were not used in the published collection of the Booker T. Washington papers, show that instead of allowing Chisum to become a part of the Tuskegee Machine, BTW, and Scott played Machiavellian games with Chisum to keep him from becoming a business entrepreneur.²⁰ Chisum separated himself from the Tuskegee Machine over the next

¹⁸ Ellen Collins to Booker T. Washington, 19 June 1908. Box 41. Harlan Papers. “Name Negro” is a slur on Chisum’s character.

¹⁹ William L. Buckley to Geo Foster Peabody, 9 March 1908. Box 41. Harlan Papers. Harlan’s researchers found this information in the Peabody Collection. Melvin Chisum to Booker T. Washington, 22 May 1908. Box 41. Harlan Papers.

²⁰ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, 7.

two years. Chisum worked missions for rich men and in turn sought them to aid his causes.

William Buckley supported Chisum in acquiring the \$5,500 to pay his debt. From the Louis Harlan collection, the letter Buckley wrote to George Foster Peabody reads:

The chief reason why I take interest in the matter is this: Mr. Chisum through his candor and unquestioned honesty has succeeded in getting together a large number of people, possibly a hundred, who out of their small means have contributed toward the inauguration of the Great Northern Realty Co., and they were getting down to the business when the financial crash came last October. The failures of the Company would cost each one only a few dollars loss, but the greater damage is in the loss of confidence in business undertakings by their own people. I believe that Mr. Chisum's honesty and persistence would win out, if he could get the encouragement he desires.²¹

Chisum's businesses became stable. Again in 1910 he sought work from the Tuskegee Machine. He continued to query BTW about other missions he could do for pay. Elected in 1914, as the President of the National Negro Press Association, (NNPA), Chisum's last and greatest mission for BTW occurred far away from New York in Oklahoma, the last of the Southern states. However, the correspondence between Chisum and BTW seemed coded, see chapter five, *Chisum in Oklahoma*.

On the back cover of the Harlan book *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, was an excerpt from the *Journal of Southern History*, that analyzed Harlan's "combining sympathy

²¹ Harlan Papers, Box 43, Spies, Chisum folder; Wm. L. Buckley, Principal of P.S. 80, Borough of Manhattan, to George Foster Peabody, 8 March 1908, Box 1, G. P. Peabody Papers. Harlan Papers.

and critical detachment with a sure eye for complexity and ambiguity” in the BTW character, only one historian, Maceo Crenshaw Dailey, has broken the code of the hero worship of Emmett Scott.²² In *When the Saints Go Hobbling In: Emmett Jay Scott and the Booker T. Washington Movement* (2013), Dailey uncovers Scott’s character flaw. Scott had a selfish preoccupation with business opportunities rather than a deep compassion for people. Dailey surmises that even W.E.B. Du Bois attacked Scott for the lack of compassion about soldiers he was paid to care for during World War I. Dailey described Scott by using words of W. E. B. DuBois in the *Crisis*, a magazine of the NAACP. He wrote, “In the May 1919 issue of *Crisis*, DuBois took Scott to task for not using his position to better the conditions of black soldiers: Was Scott aware of the treatment of black soldiers in France? If not why did he fail to find out? If he knew, what did he do about it?”²³ Scott destroyed most of his papers before he died. The Emmett Scott Collection was pilfered and closed at Morgan State University for years. Dailey concluded from what primary sources were available that Scott was more a capitalist than an altruist—and, though Dailey did not say it, how much Scott was unlike Chisum when it came to being a hero for the destitute.

Tuskegee changed. Washington died in 1915 and Robert Russa Moton was appointed Principal of Tuskegee Institute. Emmett Scott and Moton had an antagonist relationship. After years of rivalry over leadership – Scott had basically run the college under Washington – Scott left in 1919 for Howard University in

²² Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*. This was one of several excerpts from reviewers the back of the paperback copy, 1983 edition, of the *Wizard of Tuskegee*.

²³ Dailey. 162-165.

Washington D.C. According to Dailey, Scott was overlooked for the position of Principal because he stayed second-in-command so long. During the period of World War 1, Chisum acquired a position of efficiency agent for the Department of Labor's U.S. Employment Service Division of Negro Economics. Already good acquaintances, Robert Russa Moton and Melvin Chisum became close friends and business associates. While Albon Holsey was Moton's secretary, Chisum became a personal aid to him and performed the tasks that were once carried out in the Tuskegee Machine by Scott.

Chisum – A Cult Hero?

Chisum changed. His personal success paired with his work in Oklahoma opened a flood of altruist fervor in Chisum. This fervor was bolstered by his experiences as a government appointed efficiency agent during the WWI. He regained the invincibility from youth he had when he was used as a ball passed between Union Soldiers. Having an intimate insight into the exploitation by employers of thousands of southern blacks the "to the degree of slavery," Chisum shape-shifted once more; he combined a Brer Rabbit mentality of invincibility with his training as a gentleman, entrepreneur to become an efficiency agent—a "fixer" in post war times for businesses and the government and a hero for many.²⁴

²⁴ Henry Gudza, "Labor Department's First Program to Assist Black Workers," *Monthly Labor Review*, no. June (1982). 41.

As well as becoming a labor agent Chisum achieved another step in becoming a type of bold, brave freedom fighter in the way of Sojourner Truth or Harriett Tubman by taking unheard of risks to save people he did not know personally; to save them from their plight as human agricultural or business implements without choice or voice over their plight. However, as a labor agent Chisum went further than other agents. He aided in escapes during daylight hours from fields and coal mines by people guarded by men with guns. He played the “Uncle Tom” to rescue blacks from the South during the period of World War I.²⁵ According to family legacy by night he became “a handsome, tall, thin, light skinned Negro.”²⁶ Chisum’s friend and colleague Wendell Dabney wrote about Chisum’s ambiguous work in that “someone had to run the gauntlet and do seductive missionary work below the Mason-Dixon’s line, and no one was better fitted in appearance, dramatic ability, diplomacy, and intellectual equipment than Melvin J. Chisum.”²⁷ Dabney wrote, “At first Chisum worked like Sojourner Truth and Levi Coffin and [the] great ‘underground railroad’” heroes of the antebellum days. They helped the slave Negroes come North. The slave trade ended, but no one knew how many Americans still lived in slave-like conditions in the South.

While working for the Division of Negro Economics as an efficiency agent, Chisum was also a labor agent for Northern big business. In Robert Russa Moton’s autobiography, *Making a Way Out*, he explained the term, “efficiency man,” using

²⁵ Wendell Phillips Dabney, *Cincinnati’s Colored Citizens; Historical, Sociological and Biographical* (Ohio: Negro University Press, 1926), 196

²⁶ Linda Twine, *Conversations* (Oklahoma: Self Published, 1991), OKCU.

²⁷ Dabney, *Chisum’s Pilgrimage and Others*, 1-10.

Chisum as an example: "...there is a tendency toward greater consideration, especially on the part of many large manufacturing establishments, for the welfare of their coloured [sic] employees. In these plants may be found what are known as 'efficiency men,' whose business it is to look after the morale of coloured [sic] workers."²⁸ According to William Wayne Giffin, in *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio* (2005), Chisum and Joseph Lyons, established a labor-recruiting center in Ohio. Through the agency they recruited thousands of southerners – at one dollar apiece – who went north to work in “manufacturing and munitions plants.”²⁹

Chisum was supposed to go into businesses and identify how to make workers and businesses harmonize more efficiently but Chisum, being Chisum, worked both sides of the labor movement and put his own money into train fares. During the day, he went into factories and worked with Southern businessmen; all his other times Chisum literally roamed the fields of southern states including Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and risked his life to “free” Negroes so they could receive better living conditions in the North. In 1916 Chisum went South into the fields as one of them from picking cotton to tobacco, fished with long shore-men and

²⁸ Robert Russa Moton, *Finding a Way Out: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1922, 281-282.

²⁹ In the twenty first century more books mention the work of Melvin Chisum as a labor agent. See: William Giffin, *African Americans and the Color Line in Ohio, 1915-1930* (Columbia: Ohio State University Press, 2005). 11-12; James Grossman, *Black Workers in the Era of the Great Migration 1916-1929, Black Studies Research Sources: Microfilms from Major Archival and Manuscript Collections* (Maryland: University Publications of America, Inc, 1985). Chisum, Melvin J., RG 183, Bureau of Employment Security, 0708, Container 14, Reel 16, and Charles Payne and Adam Green, *Time Longer Than Rope: A Century of African American Activism, 1850-1950* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 281.

lived with plain blacks and poorer whites gathering labor for northern industry.³⁰ Dabney's story of thousands brought out of servitude conditions is collaborated by Chisum family history, Carter G. Woodson's book on migration, and Department of Labor pamphlets published in the years 1916 and 1917. While there are no records or statistics the Negro Labor pamphlet referred to "large numbers left" during the period Chisum worked. The volume of migration seemed to go up based on Chisum's movements.³¹

Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr.'s, story of his father continues the tale of Dabney's writings and the efforts of the Negro efficiency agents. He told the story. "Dad was also involved in efforts to get black people to migrate from South to North. He worked for Judge Gary (1846-1927) at one time. Judge Gary was the man who operated if not who owned the United States Steel Corporation." Gary, Indiana, was named for him. He explained that his father would go down to the South, during World War I and ask black people if they would like to go "up North" for jobs. The reason many blacks stayed in the South was because of a lack of transportation. "Dad would tell them at such-and-such a time there is going to be a train at such-and-such a railroad and you can get on that train and it will take you to Detroit, or that train will take you to Chicago as the case may be." Dr. Chisum's narrative correlates with information printed in the *Broad Axe*, a newspaper in 1928.³² The front page

³⁰ Wendell Dabney, *Cincinnati Colored Citizens*, 122.

³¹ T.R. Snavely R. H. Leavell, T.J. Woofter, "Negro Migration in 1916-1917," in *Division of Negro Economics*, ed. U. S. Department of Labor (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1916-1917), 52-65.

³² Julius Taylor, "Col. Melvin J. Chisum: Field Secretary of the National Negro Press Association, Widely Traveled knows the Big Men of the Nation in Politics and in

spread of the Anglo newspaper explained how Chisum helped a northern railroad owner who had given up hope find enough men in order to get a stalled train station back on the tracks.

With the understanding of a greater Spirit within, Chisum attempted and achieved supernatural feats. It is possible that without BTW, as black leader, Chisum felt he had to do something tangible to aid people in the Progressive Era when big business and the need for war materials seemed to recreate the age of slavery. His work aided poorer black Americans to become a part of the progressive zeal in society. Labor agents bought the idea of a “progressive era” down to the common human. It gave the class of Americans a chance to participate in the excitement of the time of reform and national growth. Dr. Chisum’s conversation continued, “This was the way many of the workers were recruited to operate the industrial base of the nation during World War I and also how many people came from Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and Louisiana and went to Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago and other places in the North to the industrial heartland.” Chisum’s “people raids” were dangerous. Chisum even had a bounty on him. Dr. Chisum acknowledged that, “Dad said that this was a dangerous business because naturally the southerners knew that it was going on and they were not at all anxious to see these people who lived and worked down there and who were also an important part of their economy leave. So, it was a dangerous thing and it had to be done quietly and secretly. And

Business,” *The Broad Axe*, (Salt Lake City), 20 October 1928.

that's what he did." However, as in the Brer rabbit tales, Chisum did not completely escape without a trace. There were bounties for the unknown superman.

Unlike Chisum's relative Merrick Trammell (chapter 1) literally back stabled by a white colleague, the Chisum family stories explained that a white reporter helped with Chisum's escapades. Dr. Chisum explained that, "There was one white reporter who knew that Dad was involved in this business. He said to him, 'Chisum, you can get killed doing this. What can I do to help?' " Dad said, "Describe me. Tell them that I'm a tall, thin, light skinned Negro." The description of Melvin Chisum during this period is very important in the stories of American Black Civil Religion in order to tell the history of black rebellion. Dr. Chisum recalled his father's story. "Dad said that is what his friend did. The reporter wrote an article about a recruiter of black men for the industry up North. He was described in the paper as a handsome, tall, thin, light skinned Negro with a mustache, which was about as far away from Melvin J. Chisum Sr. as you can get." At that point Dr. Chisum remembered a story from late 1950's or early 1960's when an incident occurred in the hospital.

I was talking to my patient in a hospital room at Mercy Douglass Hospital.

The man who shared the room with my patient inquired,

"Is your name Chisum?"

"I answered, "Well, my name is Melvin Chisum and the only other Melvin Chisum I've known is my father."

He said, "Oh, I'm certainly glad to meet you. Your father was a great man. He came down to the eastern shore and started a bank. We farmers were down there and didn't have any way to borrow money. Nobody would loan us any. Mr. Chisum

came down there and started a bank. I have never forgotten him for that reason. He loaned me the money and I didn't lose my farm."³³

In the Middle Atlantic States, Melvin Chisum, Sr., established the in 1912 Houston Savings Bank of Salisbury, Maryland, "in the heart of one of the richest farming sections of the Middle Atlantic States, surrounded by blacks of wonderful possibilities," on the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia.³⁴ In 1910 Chisum incorporated the Brickhouse Banking Company in Northampton County, Virginia. Living in Norfolk at the time, he helped organize and served as the first president to Hare Valley Bank with other officers from surrounding counties; Reuben Upshur, Jacob Griffith, Charles Brickhouse, Taylor Jefferson, Peter Bivins, and B.T. Coard. The *Baltimore Sun* newspaper reported that while celebrating Emancipation Proclamation Day in Salisbury, Melvin Chisum, who at that time was still president of the Hare Valley Bank in Hare Valley Virginia, saw the possibilities of a bank in Salisbury. Without the aid of the Tuskegee Machine in 1910, Chisum found financial backing to establish the bank from three donors; S. T. Houston, Rev. P. O'Connell and Rev. R.G. Waters. Backed by S.T. Houston, Chisum established the Salisbury bank in December of 1910.³⁵ He wrote to BTW "P.S. My bank here is a big success...."³⁶

³³ Twine, *Conversations*, 3-5, OKCU.

³⁴ Monroe Work, *Negro Year Book: An Annual Encyclopedia of the Negro* (Alabama: Tuskegee Institute, 1913), 177. Edward Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1918), 296. Melvin Chisum, President the Brickhouse Banking Company Exmore, Va. to Booker T. Washington, 8 April 1910. Harlan Papers.

³⁵ Negro Bank for Salisbury: Progressive City Gets First of a Kind in its section, *The Baltimore Sun* (Maryland) 8 December 1910. Melvin Chisum to Booker T. Washington 27 December 1911. Box 42, Harlan Papers.

Chisum proved himself. Deposits from secret societies, churches, and individuals that white bankers would not accept helped make the banks for the black communities that he started a success.

Guardians using money from black Indians and Native Indians to build Tulsa fueled Oklahoma's Progressive Era reform, while blacks on the eastern shore of Maryland and Virginia had the money but no Progressive Era leader to establish new reforms until Chisum crossed over the horizon. His resume included working for Booker T. Washington (BTW), working in real estate in New York, pugilism, a successful journalist career and he identified himself with various philanthropists. Like the individual in the hospital who would speak to Dr. Chisum, they understood Chisum as a folk hero who swooped down to lift them out of the clutches of Jim Crow racism just at the point when they could have given up Progressive Era restructuring. In modernity, it seems financially feasible that someone would start a bank for blacks. However, blackness remained a curse, like the mark or stain on Cain's forehead, for black communities that needed financial institutions. Chisum was not a financier but he was an entrepreneur willing to take a chance on blacks in a time of social reform, a time so overwhelmed with ideas of Social Darwinism, racist historiography, and led by President Woodrow Wilson who steadily took away privileges of the black nation by bringing racist ideology back into the

³⁶ Melvin Chisum, publisher of the *Tri State News* to Booker T. Washington, 27 December 2010. Melvin Chisum to Booker T. Washington, 27 December 1910. Box 41, Harlan Papers.

presidential administration. Chisum pulled black communities together by giving hope.

For those in black skin, he was like a wizard, genie or a man with a Holy Spirit to change things, the one who saw what others had and though it may not have matched the statue quo in magnitude or beauty – their Brer Rabbit – made sure they had the same opportunities on a scale they could handle. Whites had newspapers. He developed newspapers for blacks. Whites had banks; he made sure blacks had banks. He reversed the curse of having black skin by going into the black community finding the blacks who could lead and giving them the chance to be in charge of their own instead of having to wait for whites to open to them on their terms. After Chisum settled their banks, he left them in their hands and moved to another place. Brer rabbit not only brought carrots; he bought the carrot seeds home. During the period Chisum also published *The Colored Man newspaper* (1914), *The Tri State News* (1911), *the Tri State Times* (1913), *Baltimore Tribune* (1912) the *Okmulgee Light* (1914), and *The Oklahoma Tribune* (1914).

During World War I, his brother William Woodruff Chisum joined the 15th New York National Guard Regiment that became 369th Infantry regiment nicknamed “the Harlem-Hell Fighters.” As efficiency agent, when Chisum worked for the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company (TCI), the Chickasaw Shipbuilding Company, and the Federal Ship Building Company, a subsidiary of United States Steel his work at TCI helped stop “some of the more flagrant abuses practiced.”³⁷ However, practices

³⁷ Melvin Chisum to George Haynes, 5 October 1918, file 8/102a. Moton Papers.

of the businesses towards black and poor white workers eventually grew so harsh even Chisum could not handle the racial situation without developing a sort of reverse Machiavellian plan – something Brer Rabbit or Toussaint L'Overture would have appreciated. Even working as a government official, Chisum could do little to help people against the money behind the united southern industries' political force. He alerted George Haynes about the problem. Haynes was the first African American to receive a Ph. D. from Columbia University, and who was appointed head of the Division of Negro Economics. Haynes went to Alabama, called the national chair to deal with the white business owners but Haynes' words fell on deaf ears. Haynes contacted the white Assistant Secretary of Labor, Louis Post, to deal with the issue.

After Secretary Post visited TCI, Chisum wrote to Haynes, explaining that:

Mr. Post's visit here did a lot of good in the matter of putting a stop to some of the injustices practiced against colored labor. I do not mean to state that these Southern gentlemen have come over to the Lord's side by any means, but they have desisted from some of the more flagrant abuses practiced. I believed the word was passed around that certain things had better slack off a bit and they did. The colored gentlemen who met Mr. Post were greatly encouraged by the broadminded way Mr. Post treated them. They had never before met a white man who would treat them as they were real men.³⁸

Despite his successes, Chisum grew disillusioned about his work as an efficiency agent. Did Chisum remember the helplessness of the 1870s when the white man Dixie plundered and killed blacks? The black hero Merritt Terrill could not fight without the white Cavalry. He had to find an effective way to deal with

³⁸ Melvin Chisum to George Haynes, 5 October 1918, file 27G-C, Moton Papers.

labor leaders and he was developing relationships to use the power of sympathetic whites. He wrote to Robert Russa Moton, a personal confidante and president of Tuskegee; that he was “thinking of withdrawing from the labor business permanently and starting a hog raising business on my Eastern Shore farm. I have no further personal interests in the business other than the race interest which will cause me to keep an eye upon this labor situation for the good I may be able to do.” There was little he could do to stop the exploitation of black workers. In Moss Point, Mississippi, Chisum wrote that he “saw at least one hundred white men loafing about the streets and sitting upon goods boxes whittling sticks, while the police were herding colored men to the justice of the peace’s office as loiterers.”³⁹

Brian Kelly argued in *Beyond the Talented Tenth: Black Elites, Black Workers and the Limits of Accommodation* (2002) that the fundamental division within the African American community was not between elite advocates of protest and accommodation, but between black workers and middle-class race leaders. He lashed out at Chisum in his book. Kelly wrote that after his work in Birmingham, Chisum went on to a rather dubious career securing black strikebreakers for northern industrial employers during World War I.⁴⁰ While Kelly looked at Chisum through the morality of the post-Civil Rights movement expert, John Roberts, a black historian, wrote that “Deviation from certain norms may occur not because they are rejected but because a given situation may accord precedence to other norms.

³⁹ Melvin Chisum to R. R. Moton, 12 July 1918, file 191 CA-C1, Moton Papers.

⁴⁰ Brian Kelly, *Beyond the Talented Tenth: Black Elites, Black Workers and the Limits of Accommodation in Industrial Birmingham, 1900-1921* (New York: New York University Press, 2002) online School of Modern History, Queen’s University of Belfast, 1-14.

Norms especially legal norms, may be neutralized. . . . Most if not all norms in society are conditional. Rarely, if ever, are they categorically imperative.”⁴¹ Thus, it was possible for slaves to rationalize their need to lie, cheat and steal. The same could be said for southern black workers trying to survive under the harsh and onerous conditions of the Jim Crow era in the South. To fight the Crow, Chisum had to shape shift into an invincible super hero.

Certainly, Chisum’s work ethics for TCI were sometimes ambiguous and questionable. On the one hand, Chisum worked for TCI as an efficiency man and attempted to hire non-union labor for the company; he discouraged workers from joining unions, and instead encouraged them to be content in their work for TCI. On the other hand, he accepted pay for his work and then financed blacks and poor white people’s passage to the North to work for northern industrialists who were willing to offer them better wages and a better way of life. Chisum filled two voids with his actions. He assisted in keeping several major American industries running during the war and aided people in getting positions outside of the South. The Jim Crow laws were designed to limit and deny blacks basic legal rights. When employers resorted to physical coercion and violence that were the equivalent of slavery, the vehicle for sending blacks and poorer whites North for better working conditions had been laid. Chisum used the same tracks that got him out of Mexia—the railroad. In his disillusionment Chisum developed an aggressive plan that would free southern blacks and poor whites while making money to survive.

⁴¹ John Roberts, *From Trickster to Bad Man: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1989), 182.

This is only a glimpse of Chisum's antics prior to the 1920s. From his work around the country Chisum did develop a national following, a readership, into the 1920s; he became something more like a "cult hero" for poor Northerners than a journalist: James Anderson, the founder of the New York *Amsterdam News*, reported that saving people from injustice was Chisum's forte: "Service, Service to the race seemed to be the only ace card Chisum held, and it wasn't up his sleeve by any means. The only time we saw him frown was when an injustice to his people was mentioned."⁴²

After World War I, due to his support of Republicans, Chisum managed to become a kind of walking delegate in Congress during the Warren G. Harding administration. Even without a political position such as Republican leaders Lincoln Johnson and Perry Howard, black party leaders from Mississippi and Georgia, Chisum gained leverage to sell patronage positions, and sit in on presidential conferences with black leaders in the Harding administration. What his leverage was to acquire the prestige to move into congressional halls during the period is not clear. It could be linked to his work as efficiency engineer during the World War I. This part of Chisum's life involves the way politicians used patronage to reward the faithful. Chisum was knee deep in the process until the process became "lily-white" when Jim Crow took over the Republican party. For Chisum personally, the key was he lost a source of income.

⁴² "Melvin J. Chisum, Benefactor," *Amsterdam News* (New York), 1 July 1925.

The patronage system, and patronage brokers operated thusly. In order to acquire a position in segregated society, an applicant needed to get his vitae before the right congressman or politician. As a “self styled delegate,” Chisum would bring such information before the right person. If the applicant obtained the position it came with a cost paid to Chisum—that is. He was a patronage broker helping job-seekers finding a position. Chisum started making contacts early in 1920. A letter from Chisum to Roscoe Dunjee, the black Republican leader in Oklahoma, advised the editor of the *Black Dispatch Newspaper* “You are running a paper. You are an able speaker. You have a splendid chance for advancement in the next government, which will go into power at Washington in March 1921. Be advised by a friend use some of the space which you give away toward backing up Dr. Moton.”⁴³ Chisum attempted to gain the possibility of making at the least \$500 dollars per person by contacting possible qualified candidates to get in line for positions months in advance. Chisum was not an elected official. His activity was not discovered and he continued selling patronage jobs as part of his missions.

He obtained paid commissions but they were irregular; without Republican spoils and patronage work, his income was unsteady. Patronage was paid in increments, and not all at once. They made for steady income if there was a percentage of it coming in every month. Chisum’s second child, Anne (Jr.), was born on August 8, 1923. With a growing family to support, he needed a stable income. His anti-union stance sometimes caused him not to get jobs. His daughter Anne

⁴³ Melvin Chisum to Roscoe Dunjee, 9 September 1920. MCJSR. Moton Papers.

remembered him saying, “Nobody’s going to tell me what to do with my money,” when his wife suggested a position that had ties to a union.

Dr. Melvin Chisum Jr. recounted what he knew of his parent’s marriage and their early days. “They met in Baltimore, where my mother was working as the office nurse of a dentist. Mother was a graduate of the Frederick Douglass Nurses Training School in Philadelphia, class of 1916. They were married in Baltimore in early 1921, but I know nothing of the details of their courtship. They moved to Philadelphia shortly after their marriage and lived in rented rooms on the third floor of a rooming house in South Philadelphia “where I was born later that year, and my sister Anne 20 months later. We moved to Washington in late 1923 or 1924 and resided at 253 N Street N.W. It was my understanding the he moved to Washington to work as a lobbyist for Elbert Gary of the U.S. Steel Corporation. Then it was probably in 1925 that we moved to Glencoe, Illinois (about 19 miles north of Chicago).” He made that move in order to work for Samuel Insull, the great utility magnate.

Much of the time we lived in Glencoe, Daddy was away from home. Letters to his wife, or son or daughter came frequently—from D.C. or from Tuskegee, or from N.Y.C. or from any number of cities in the South, which seemed like fascinating places to my sister and me because we received letters from him from there. My sister and I enjoyed our childhood. It did not bother us that our father was away from home most of the time. We knew no other way. My mother seemed to tolerate it so it was no problem with us. We loved our parents dearly and they obviously loved us, so life was beautiful in our eyes. Anne and I were close to our mother and if we had sensed any distress in her, I am certain we would have shared it.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dr. Melvin Chisum Jr. to Author 30 April 2012, OKCU.

To Chicago: Chisum, Oscar De Priest and Samuel Insull

Thus, Chisum found an income that more than made up for his lost income as a patronage broker. As Chisum Jr. noted, in 1925, the family moved to Glencoe, Illinois so Chisum could work for Samuel Insull. In the 1920s, Insull was one of the most powerful men in Chicago with more than two to three million dollars invested in electric and other utilities, including natural gas. His organization provided ten percent of the nation's electrical power and served five thousand communities in thirty-two states. Insull was once secretary to Thomas Edison. Insull was especially hospitable to the blacks in Chicago.

Oscar De Priest, a black local politician who was once an Alderman in Chicago's Ward 3, continued to flounder as a politician as he had from the early teens.⁴⁵ However, in 1923, De Priest landed what seemed a stable job with electrical magnate Samuel Insull in Chicago. During the 1920s, Chicago politicians realized that the black vote was becoming valuable. Insull hired Oscar De Priest to be an efficiency man, a kingmaker, to make ties between blacks and candidates favorable to the utilities magnate. Part of De Priest's problems in politics stemmed from a lack of presentation; he was disheveled in appearance and much less suave than Chisum and other politicians of the time period. Wendell Phillips Dabney told the story in the *Union* newspaper. "When [De Priest] began to look beyond the city, to consider

⁴⁵ "Former Alderman Oscar De Priest; Chicago; Attorney Edward Wilson; Edward H. Morris," *The Appeal*, (Chicago), 26 May 1917. The city of Chicago contains fifty wards or legislative districts. Each ward elects one Alderman. Aldermen make up the Chicago City Council. They govern the city with the mayor. An alderman's term is four years.

larger affairs, he invited Melvin Chisum, who had done heavy work in public relations during the war, to come to the city to be his advisor."⁴⁶ Their relationship in the early 1920s laid the foundation for an ongoing black power struggle that lasted into the 1930s. Instead of carrying out his mission for De Priest, who hired Chisum to groom him into a presentable man-of-affairs, Chisum blatantly stole De Priest's job. Chisum exposed De Priest's crooked past to Insull's millionaire lawyer, Daniel Schyler. In the early 1900s, De Priest worked under crime boss William Taylor in Chicago.

Under Taylor, De Priest became an Alderman, an elected member a city council. Chisum proved that De Priest embezzled money given to support the black community. In stark contrast to De Priest, Chisum displayed to Insull his ability to work in Chicago and get things done. He also held a resume of work with the government and private sector. As a result, Insull fired De Priest and retained Chisum as his efficiency engineer. Working for Insull, Chisum was the only black man with an office in one of the largest banks in Chicago, the Continental Illinois National Bank. "He was given a country car and a country home in the exclusive suburb of Glencoe, and banked a thousand dollars a month."⁴⁷ Chisum moved his family from Philadelphia to Illinois.

Other than being one of the first black families in our community to have an automobile, we had none of the accouterments of wealth. This car was usually not in Glencoe because my father took it on his "business trips." His wife never had a wardrobe of fancy clothes, or expensive jewelry. We were always well housed, well fed and adequately clothed. I would say that we were certainly not wealthy, nor

⁴⁶ "A Friend in Need," *Union, (Cincinnati)* 26 April 1934.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

were we needy.” What my father’s friends and associates knew about him and his work and the people for whom he worked, made them think he must be wealthy. His manners were those of a distinguished, wealthy gentleman.⁴⁸

Dabney wrote about the episode in the *Union Newspaper*, “Chisum and De Priest also became bitter personal and public enemies.” Perhaps in the manner he made Roscoe Dunjee a king in Oklahoma, Chisum did, in a second-hand way, for De Priest. De Priest moved away from developing symbiotic ties with white politicians to build himself a political machine of twenty-five thousand blacks that would vote him into becoming the first black in the House of Representatives since Reconstruction in the 1928 election.

Reviewing one of Chisum’s escapades while working for Insull, Owens wrote in the *Messenger* that Chisum played the ultimate Uncle Tom game on his white colleagues. Owens compared him to “Like L’Ouverture, the Haitian slave, patriot, and martyr that defeated Napoleon Bonaparte; Chisum had become “the one who finds an opening” for African Americans in a time of heightened racism, industrial slavery, and economic turmoil.” In his capacity of efficiency engineer for Insull, Chisum hosted a dinner between Insull and the National Negro Press Association (NNPA). The NNPA gathered at the famous Appomattox Club for an elaborate banquet paid for by Insull. They were supposed to retire to the Unity Club to meet Insull personally. However, only six Negro editors came to the after-dinner reception. In trouble, Chisum left the gathering hall and ran down the stairs to

⁴⁸ Melvin Chisum Jr. to Author, 30 August 2005. OKCU.

where a group of men in a “Moorish Science Cult” were meeting. Chisum negotiated to pay the men fifty cents a piece to attend the meeting with Insull. “Uninformed and turbaned Moors” filled the large hall. At the end of the successful gathering, Insull scolded the “editors” for not arriving on time. He said, not realizing that he had been duped, “If colored people are as late getting to heaven making C. P. T. time [colored people time] as they frequently do elsewhere, the white people will all be inside and St. Peter will have closed the gate ere they arrive.”⁴⁹ The outcome of the meeting was that a new Boy’s Club was established for black young men with a big pool. Insull insisted on giving all the money for the project.

Chisum delved into other controversies that included the fight against the unionization of porters. Chisum followed BTW’s stance on blacks and unions “the future belonged to the man, or the class of men, who seeks his own welfare.”⁵⁰ His intimate relationship to the Pullman family probably played into his stance. Melvin Chisum Jr. on his father and unions: “First was the public aspect. He spent many of his middle years developing the philanthropic proclivities of wealthy industrialists to the benefit of Tuskegee Institute. These wealthy developers, owners and managers of the country’s great corporations, would hardly respond to the pleas for funds for a black school down south from someone whom they identified with the unions which they were fighting continuously.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., *Union, (Cincinnati)* 26 April 1934.

⁵⁰ Booker T. Washington, “The Negro and Labor Unions *The Atlantic Monthly*,” June 1913. 756-767.

⁵¹ Melvin Chisum Jr. to Author, 30 August 2005. OKCU.

Chisum's son also identified a second aspect of his father's anti-union stance that was personal. "Dad's continual hostility toward the union movement was (with one exception) toward the management of the unions. He felt that union officials were not interested in the welfare of their members, but in themselves. In addition, he disliked their manners, their means of operation, and everything about them. He was the smooth, persuasive, diplomatic type. They were head-knockers and fighters. He considered them to be low-born, ill-bred, coarse and foul-mouthed. He dismissed them as 'scoundrels.' He identified much more with the capitalists than with the unionists. The exception I mentioned above? A Philip Randolph, whom my father described to me more than once as 'a smart young man.'" ⁵²

Chisum remained loyal to the Bookerite anti-union philosophy. Washington's paradigm had opposed organized labor. "The Tuskegee philosophy had no place in its teachings for organized labor and Washington and his followers advised blacks to line up with the great captains of industry."⁵³ By 1919, the National Urban League, a branch of Washington's Business League, pulled away from Washington's anti-union stance. However, in 1924, the National Negro Press Association condemned "all forms of unionism and economic radicalism" and advised blacks "to stand squarely behind capital."⁵⁴ Chisum was field secretary for the NNPA group

⁵² Ibid., Melvin Chisum Jr. to Author, August 30, 2005. OKCU.

⁵³ William Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1977). 10.

⁵⁴ Harvard, Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 170.

who voted against unions.⁵⁵ According to Roi Ottley, writing on Robert Abbott, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, and contrary to today's public knowledge, the Negro press generally attacked A. Phillip Randolph and unions.⁵⁶ Chisum like Washington was prejudiced against unions. In the midst of his investigation of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital, (see next chapter) and his growing family, he found the time and energy to swipe, condemn and sabotage first Robert L. Mays, the president of the International Railway Men's association, and later he would attacked Asa Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Pullman Porters.

In 1924 Mays attempted to sue Chisum for \$10,000 alleging defamation of character after Chisum published a scandalous article in the *Pittsburg Courier* newspaper suggesting that Mays - the man who organized Pullman Porter's, allegedly squandered money on fast women- while visiting in Chicago's Buffet flats. He used tactics he had used in Oklahoma to win justice for the black Indians; Chisum sent to the a news telegram to the paper stating "Mays was arrested Friday night by Detective Sergeant John T. Scott in a booze raid." Chisum's telegram read:

Robert L. Mays nabbed in Raid. Robert L. Mays, prominent colored labor agitator and organizer of Pullman car porters, was nabbed tonight by Detective Sergeant John T. Scott (colored detective) and his booze squad in a booze raid on a bootleggers joint. Mays was found in possession of three quarts of bootleg liquor and put up stiff battle in order to get away. . . Mays, it will be remembered,

⁵⁵ Toward the end of his life Washington came to believe that unions might stop discrimination against blacks and play a more positive role in the economic lives of black workers. Robert Factor, *The Black Response to America: Men, Ideals, and Organization fro Frederick Douglass to the NAACP*, (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1970) 348, pointed out he may only have been seeking new support because of the loss of federal patronage with the Democratic take over in 1913.

⁵⁶ Roi Ottley, *The Lonely Warrior: The Life and Times of Robert S. Abbott*, (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1955), 263.

squandered much money a few years ago which resulted in the property which was purchased in the city for a home for Pullman porters being sold under foreclosure.⁵⁷

Declaring his enemies to include both Melvin Chisum (of Tennessee, newspaperman and politician) and Oscar De Priest, who were both anti union, Mays struck back at Chisum by “declaring Chisum’s article [a] vicious and malicious frame up.” He countered that Chisum was an unscrupulous enemy. “My enemies cannot stop the program of achieving an independent labor organization for the purpose of securing reasonable wage and just working conditions for 25,000 Pullman porters.” Mays criticized Chisum’s character calling Chisum in the *Pittsburg Courier* newspaper “an alleged ex-convict of the State of Oklahoma.”⁵⁸ De Priest responded with an article in the *Pittsburg Courier*, April 19th avowing that Chisum would have to prove his allegations. The Chisum and De Priest story ran on Saturday April 26, 1924 and explained that Chisum knew names and counted noses and could give the street name of where Mays had been in the Chicago flats.

Then Chisum and De Priest, working together, walked the streets of Chicago and found the officers who arrested Mays under the name of “John Smith.” Chisum retorted in the *Pittsburg Courier* that Mays did three things wrong to get caught. The first mistake was to get arrested and use a fake name. The second was to attempt to frighten journalists from writing the story once he was out of jail. The third was that May’s allegation that Chisum was an ex- convict. Chisum wrote that “his use of the

⁵⁷ *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 12 April 1924

⁵⁸ *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 12 April 1924.

word 'alleged' let him out, but it was a hint just the same that this writer had done time. This writer has been in the business of exposing scheming grafters, highbinders and moral reprobates for more than 20 years. This writer has been sued 14 times for libel by this same litter of rats and he has never done a day in any penitentiary for his exposing of the vast crowd of fakers in eight different states." Chisum finished the article with the information that would bring Asa Philip Randolph to the forefront as the leader of the Brotherhood of sleeping cars. Through his investigations Chisum found that Mays lied. He only had 9,968 porters on his roll not 25,000. Mays was "mooching a living out of hard working Pullman porters" and only a figurehead roster.⁵⁹ Chisum by accident, pulling down Mays became a kingmaker for A. Phillip Randolph who took up the reins of the union after Mays.

Chisum wrote the following article on unions in a newspaper. The article was passed down to his son. It is not complete, nor is the name of the newspaper that published it, nor the date. However, one can feel the heart-wrenching sympathy of a man who, as an efficiency man, has watched the violence and mutilation of men for their work. The title is "Reasons Why the Pullman Porters should Not Organize" . . .

Probably the most burning question before black America today is "should the Pullman Porters be organized into American Federation of Labor?" In the opinion of this writer, there are twelve thousand good reasons why they should not do so, and following are a few of the twelve thousand.

The history of the colored worker in his efforts to affiliate with the organized unions in this country is one of tragedy of cracked skulls, broken necks and prison stripes, resulting from the organized colored worker have been used as a cat's paw during periods of strikes, which are always called as soon as the colored brother gets organized.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Who doubts may go to the prison mines in Kentucky and Alabama (where the state sells prisoners to mine operators), and acquaints himself with hordes of colored men incarcerated there as the result of strikes which were called ten, twelve and fifteen years ago and the colored unionists (newly inducted into the Union) were held responsible for the mine riots, sabotage, etcetera, only the black men were prosecuted and only black men were convicted and killed.

Other Southern Atrocities

For many years, ever since railroads were built in the South, colored men have worked as flagmen and brakemen on the freight trains and on many roads they worked as firemen. These Negro workers were never disturbed in the South by any force whatsoever until 1920, when efforts were introduced to organize them into unions.

Early in 1921, Preston Banks, who had for ten years worked as a fireman on the M.&O. railroad, was handed a letter at his home in West Point, Miss purporting to be sent by the K.K.K. This letter threatened Banks with murder if he did not to quit his job. Banks sent his letter to the Chicago office and kept on living. Very soon after this, Dee Allen and Silas Porter, firemen also of West Point, were sent the same sort of letters and they followed the same course which Banks took. The spirit of the movement against colored men organizing soon began to manifest itself in Clarksdale and Aberdeen. (Paragraphs cut out) (Paragraph pick up). . . Few nights after Mitchell was shot. Others shot at this same point in 1921, were Buster Clark, brakeman; Ben Tombolt, brakeman, Gene Smith fireman; Edgar Stokes, a brakeman on the Atlantic coast line, was the last man to pay the penalty so far as this writer is informed, because just about this time full report of special railroad agents had been placed upon the desk of that distinguished southern aristocrat the honorable C. H. Markham, president of the Illinois Central Railroad and when this red-blooded executive threw his lot in with the wronged employees of his company, this murder business was broken up, but not until Mr. Markham had spent thousands of dollars in the defense and support of his colored workers.

Had it not been for the efficiency and genuine human sympathy of Mr. Markham, the Lord only knows, what further carnage would have been wreaked upon these defenseless men whose only offense was, they were being importuned to "join" the union and some had been foolish enough to do so.

Chisum took a grand stand against unions in November 1925. He used his operations at the Continental Illinois National Bank to make contact with fifty of the most prominent black men and women to invite them to a conference in Washington. Overtly, the conference was to "chart a program of political action and

to bring the attention of the administration to the discontent being in the hearts of Negroes all over the country because of the negligible recognition given and the lack of concern shown by the Republicans. On March 4, it was expected that President Calvin Coolidge, ascending into the presidency in his own right, would inaugurate policies which would stop segregation and open the door of political representation and opportunity.”⁶⁰

Covertly, the conference was a chance to get leading blacks together with Coolidge and Pullman. Chisum claimed to have paid transportation, hotel, and food bills for all participants who came to Washington. After the meeting, it was obvious that the event was a “straw man” for a meeting by Coolidge and the Pullman Company to talk about the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) strike. Realizing Chisum’s close association to Pullman and Coolidge, black newspapers such as the *Pittsburg Courier* uncovered the real reason for the meeting and that Pullman paid for the whole venture.

The fact that there were no invitations for blacks who were members of the NAACP or the BSCP was a give-away of the motives of the conference.⁶¹ Several newspapers would not print the information harvested from the meeting. They knew the agenda had been the Pullman strike and not racial inclusiveness.⁶² Some

⁶⁰ Harris. 54 -56, “Leaders to Gather in Capital,” *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 31 October 1925. “Fooled to Washington,” *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 21 November 1925.

⁶¹ A. Philip Randolph, “Presidents Attention Called: Pertinent Correspondence Addressed to the White House and Prominent Citizens by A. Philip Randolph,” *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 21 November 1925.

⁶² Harris. *Keeping the Faith*, 54 -56.

members of the black press complained that Pullman was directly involved because Chisum could not have afforded the expensive event. Chisum told the *Pittsburg Courier* that he had earned the money to throw the bash from a large payment as “efficiency engineer” the previous summer and wanted to pay tribute to his friends.⁶³ However, Chisum’s scheme was uncovered.

Though the press did not accept his story about the meeting in Washington, neither Chisum nor his supporters were deterred. They continued their work against the strike. Schyler, one of the attorneys for the Pullman Company and for Insull, underwrote the formation of the National Negro Advertising Agency. Chisum was the advisor for the agency. Its aim was to place advertisements in black papers “to influence their news and editorial policies towards corporations represented by the agency.”⁶⁴ Chisum had ideal credentials for the position as field secretary of the National Negro Press Association (NNPA).

After settling himself in a stable position as a family man, Chisum continued with one more mission, to investigate for the Veterans Administration on the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. The government paid for this mission. In 1924, the workers at the institution were all black. The hospital was turned over to Dr. Joseph H. Ward as medical doctor in charge. The chief engineer of the Veterans Hospital, William Jones, a black man from Oklahoma, filed several charges against Dr. Ward’s administration with the local and national Veteran’s Bureau. The Veterans Bureau and President Coolidge’s administration called Melvin Chisum to deal with the in-

⁶³ *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 9 January 1926.

⁶⁴ Ottley. *The Lonely Warrior*, 263-264.

house problems. Because of his work in Oklahoma earlier in the first quarter of the twentieth century it proved easy to deal with the mission.

CHAPTER VII

YOU MAY COME THIS FAR BUT COME NO FURTHER, (JOB 38:11)

THE TUSKEGEE VETERANS HOSPITAL CRISIS

“The Southerner who thoroughly understands the Negro, is one who orders, dictates and browbeats the Negro, and never allows the Negro to express a wish as to what he himself feels is best for himself. If you ask a Southerner for his definition, he will swallow, and then get off some lore about his fondness for a certain Black Mammy etc., and run away from the fact; but I affirm Mr. Christian, that they know, and those of us who have lived amongst these southern white gentlemen know what they mean. When they speak of “one who thoroughly understands the Negro. ...” May I not be pardoned for reminding you, that if your wishes and the President’s wishes are to be carried out, it is necessary that you get this word to Gen. Hines so that he may not be fooled into something entirely contrary to what you wish done in this situation. I am sir, Your obedient humble servant.”¹

---Melvin Chisum to Hon. George B. Christian, THE WHITE HOUSE

In the 1920s Tuskegee Agriculture and Mechanical Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama, (Tuskegee University) faced one of its greatest political trials since

¹ Melvin Chisum to George Christian Jr, 28 February 1923, Box C410, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division Library of Congress. Hereafter cited NAACP.

inception on July 4, 1881. The assault came in the form of a three-pronged attack. As would be expected –one round came from white supremacists –including those who should have been natural racial and political allies. The rise of “lily-white” faction in the Republican Party at the end of the Progressive Era created an intra-black political power struggle that spilled over from Washington D.C. into Alabama.¹ Black politicians stripped of national political power endeavored to maneuver their way to sell political patronage positions to doctors and nurses at the new Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. The final assault came from black criminals who left the Wild West in Oklahoma, planning to infiltrate, embezzle money, and create havoc under black leadership. President Warren Harding’s administration contacted Melvin Chisum to work with Tuskegee University and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as an investigator. This chapter does not concentrate on the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital ordeal per se. Pete Daniel’s article “Black Power in the 1920’s: the Case of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital,” (1970), Vanessa Gamble’s book, *Making a Place For Ourselves*, (1995) and Mary Kaplan’s work *The Tuskegee Veterans Hospital and its Black Physicians* (2016) describe and flush out accurate presentations of the episode.²

¹ Norris Wright Cuney originated the term “lily white” at the 1888 Republican State Convention in Fort Worth, Texas. Cuney was Republican chair from 1883 until 1896. He called the whites that tried to remove blacks from their seats to attain an all-white convention “lily-whites.” www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/arti-cles.org

² Vanessa Northington Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920 - 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Pete Daniel, "Black Power in the 1920s: The Case of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," *The Journal of Southern History* 36, no. 3 (1970); Mary Kaplan, *The Tuskegee Veterans Hospital and Its Black Physicians: The Early Years* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2016).

Daniels, Gamble, and Kaplan, point to the centrality of Chisum's investigative skills and his intuition in solving the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital crisis. Using Harlan's notes, family information and written information of Chisum's contemporaries, this chapter develops the story of Chisum within the world of the hospital fiasco. The research corrects his legacy by restoring parts of his storyline and delineates his life and work in the 1920s.³

Chisum's ability to uncover evidence that eventually solved mysteries seemed uncommon and mystical to historians. Even his journalistic contemporaries found him remarkable. In his article "Black Power in the 1920s," Daniels wrote that Chisum was "prophetic in sensing trouble" as he moved step to step in aiding the government, the NAACP, and Tuskegee University in solving the hospital crisis.⁴ A former student of Louis Harlan, Daniel's opinion of Chisum was based on materials from Louis Harlan's manuscripts that later became the series the *Booker T. Washington Papers* (1972).⁵ The historian was not the only one to pick up the sense of Chisum's otherworldliness in crime solving. Chisum's own newspaper fraternity understood him as "irrepressible, omnipresent, [and] omnipotent," words that

³ During WWI Chisum worked as an efficiency agent under the Federal Division of Negro Economics. See Gudza; Brooks, "Driving Black America: Melvin Jackson Chisum Kingmaker." Master's Thesis, 41. See Judson MacLaury, "The Federal Government and Negro Workers Under President Woodrow Wilson," Paper delivered at annual meeting of Society for History on the Federal Government Washington D.C. March 16, 2000.

(www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/shfgpro00.htm.)

⁴ Daniel. 372. Louis Harlan, ed., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1970). 219. He wrote, "From 1903 to 1906 Chisum was Washington's paid spy – and perhaps sometimes provocateur – in the ranks of BTW's critics." Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*, (New York: Oxford, 1983). 473.

⁵ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, 7.

linked him to sorcery, being a super hero, or a god.⁶ However, Chisum's expertise developed not only from a magical prophetic voice from within, but from understanding how to use the information amassed, from lessons learned in the school of hard knocks, and combinations of missions, lobbying, and commissions.⁷ Researching deeply in the Louis Harlan papers and other sources provides a wider context of how he lived, his understanding of himself and the men that paid him to get work done behind the scenes. The result reveals a master manipulator, a Machiavelli or a Svengali without the evil intent.⁸

In 1922, the National Negro Press Association (NNPA) extended his otherworldly ethos to be all seeing, all present, omnipotent in his covert activities. Newspapers of the NNPA who had not died out met with independent newspapermen to form an "enlarged organization to form a closer cooperation among the race."⁹ During the meeting black newspapermen and members in the printing trade created a new position for Melvin Chisum. He became a "special representative of the Press Association to tour the United States in the interest of the organization."¹⁰ Note that one year later founder of the Associated Negro Press (ANP, 1919-1967), Claude Barnett (1889-1967), copied the position. Barnett hired

⁶ "Nashville Welcomes Press Association," *The Union*, (Cincinnati), 4 March 1924.

⁷ Chisum labeled "commission" to work he did for a percentage of the take.

⁸ George Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894). Svengali became a term after the character in the book seduced and hypnotized a girl into becoming a singer. Now its definition is one who coaches or influences another by sinister influence.

⁹ "Nashville Welcomes Press Association," *The Union*, (Cincinnati), 4 March 1924.

¹⁰ *The Broad Ax* (Chicago), 18 November 1922.

Percival L. Prattis (1895-1980) in 1923 as a feature/city editor of the ANP.¹¹ Prattis assumed the title of ANP field agent and competed against Chisum as an NNPA field agent for story lines. Prattis never achieved the status as a Warwick. There was a dark side to men who were for hire by those who had the cash to manipulate others. Prattis “described Chisum as the smoothest of a large group of underhanded operators in Chicago during the 1920s.” Prattis continued his description, “he [Chisum] had a long history of secretive and unprincipled missions for pay.”¹² No information exists to specifically support his claim. However, Chandler Owen, editor of the *Messenger* saw through Chisum’s one-sided façade of the hero. In his article *The Neglected Truth* Owens described Chisum as, “M.F.C. (Master of Fooling Crackers).” Chandler, a black socialist tagged Chisum and the newspapermen as part of “a swarm of stool-pigeons, Uncle Tom’s and Sambos . . .”¹³ Chisum’s two-pronged nature, at the least, was no secret.

Chisum’s early adventures in life, a little black boy on his own in a Reconstruction world of Texas, developed within him streaks of meanness, courage, and determination that aided him if and when he went into the underworld of places like Chicago, New York and Washington D. C. Meanness stigmatized or branded his generation. Other men from in his era possessed such characteristics.

¹¹ Prattis was famous the first African American news correspondent admitted to the press galleries of the Senate and House of Representatives. However, how was Chisum moved out under the Hoover administration if they were not there to be moved in 1928 and years before Hoover’s election?

¹² William H. Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-37*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1977) 53.

¹³ Chandler Owens, “The Neglected Truth: The Negro Press in the Hands of White Folks Niggers,” *The Messenger* 8 (1925), 80. 80.

According to a former lawman in the Texas area, Daniel Dee Harkey (1866-1958), in his book, *Mean as Hell* (1948), men had to be “mean” in order to survive. During Chisum’s generation men “changed society’s order and made laws stick with guns, knives and axes. Even peace officers trailed thieves and murderers, brought in rustlers and killers, cleaned up vice rings and even burned ballot boxes.”¹⁴ Like the roaming youth he had been, in his late forties and early fifties, Chisum at “five feet six inches in height, [medium height] with superabundant tissue uncorsetted, [growing rotund in the middle] complexion decidedly brunette, [dark skinned] and hair true to nature [hair snapped back to nappy or a tight curl pattern after combing it] ” moved around the country generally on his own.¹⁵ Chisum added occupation of field secretary of the Negro Press Association to his other entrepreneurial works. While missions for the newspaper association were basically free, he added to his potential income by using the special status to open doors to more venues, using it for locations once closed to him and opening engagements for speaking. He utilized the press pass while working on other personal detective work. Chisum was an independent worker. He created his own rules, used his own ethics or principles, had no single boss, nor anyone to report to other than the person he collected his money after a job.

Sometimes relationships developed in congressional halls that took him to places that only politicians or their aids would endeavor to frequent. Under those

¹⁴ Dee Harkey, *Mean as Hell* (New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1948). 1. James Smallwood, *Murder and Mayhem: The War of Reconstruction in Texas* (Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2003); *ibid.*

¹⁵ Wendell Phillips Dabney, “A Visit to Dunbar’s Tomb,” in *Negro Caravan*, ed. Sterling Allen Brown and Arthur Davis (New York: Dryden Press, 1941), 1001.

circumstances Chisum found clues newspapermen of other nationalities could not access. Insider relationships with congressmen, President Warren G. Harding, and the President's secretary, George B. Christian, aided his craft. He knew them by name. They knew him by name and fame; from being an efficiency agent during World War I within the Negro Economics Department, to missions he accomplished for philanthropists, and as a correspondent who walked congressional halls. Keeping financially stable, Chisum always looked for personal "commissions" from the government officials as an efficiency agent, man of business, investigator, or for work as a general "fixer."

For blacks, he was a "walking delegate" in Congressional halls but it is possible that white politicians saw him just as he was - a general fixer for black situations - as other blacks around them were administrative assistants. His work while beneficial to all offered no conflicting problem to whites, since he was not an elected official and held no seat of power. His Republican quasi-political position - as a walking delegate sort of lobbyist - remained unaltered, when "lily-white" politics affected elected black Republican officials. Chisum's covert lobbying was probably done in an Uncle Tom-cum-man of affairs attending to higher ups with an attitude that kept him in "his place" when in the congressional presence. He wrote on letterhead from several congressmen as if he meandered in and out of their offices.¹⁶

¹⁶ The author took months to find out who Melvin Chisum was after searching in congressional books. His first letters to I. W. Young were written on congressional stationary mimeographed at the top with United States Senate July ____, Washington D.C. MEMORANDUM. Some letterhead came from different committees including the COMMITTEE ON EXPENDITURES IN THE EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS. August 19, 1033 [1933]. He wrote to his children on United States Senate letterhead and memo

His technique was to unearth the congressional bills that needed support, then, find people who were interested in what he knew, then use both to his advantage. A letter to Dr. Hines showed his approach, "It is my pleasure to tell you that I have taken the matter of your Bill [sic] up with the national committee member from Maryland who is a close personal friend and one of God's best productions."¹⁷ By such pursuits, or missions - moving around the country visiting veterans and veteran hospitals - Chisum discovered the hypocrisy of the Veterans Association against Robert Russa Moton and the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. The discovery was critical in the events that followed. It would take all his wizardry of information, the use of political and fraternal connections, his ability to juggle missions, and prior covert antics - all of his expertise - to discover complications, expose villains, and solve the crisis at the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital.

As tensions intensified over whether blacks or whites would control staffing and management of the first and the only segregated black Veterans Hospital ever built, some blacks, like their white counterparts, schemed to find ways to make money off the project. Two of the highest seated but later exiled black Republicans during the Progressive Era -- both Washington D.C., attorneys--were Howard Lincoln Johnson, Georgia (1870-1925) and Perry Howard (1877-1961), Mississippi. They placed themselves in positions to gain money, prestige, and racial power at the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital. In the meantime, two black Oklahomans Dr. J. D. Nelson

paper. To My very precious Daughter from Daddy, 18 July 1933. Anne Johnson Chisum Papers, Los Angeles California.

¹⁷ Melvin Chisum to Dr. Hines, 27 November 1920. Robert Russa Morton Papers, Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee, Alabama, folder MJCSR1924. Hereafter cited as Moton Papers.

and William “Bill” Jones, who followed Colonel T. Hugh Scott, a consultant of the Veterans Bureau, from Oklahoma to Tuskegee, Alabama, clandestinely jockeyed for power and personal financial gain. The Veterans Bureau, under the administration of Colonel Charles Forbes, became “an opportunistic patchwork of individual bribery and greed.”¹⁸ Forbes participated in corrupt activities with several contractors involved in operation of hospitals that eventually led him to be imprisoned in Leavenworth. Forbes through the Veterans Bureau sold government property below cost to his colleagues. Johnson, Howard, Nelson and Jones, all black men, planned to mimic what was going on in the national offices of the Veterans Bureau at Tuskegee. They were attracted to Tuskegee in order to use money fraudulently from the new hospital for their personal gain. These men planned to bring down black leaders of Tuskegee to accomplish their goals.

In the same way that Oklahomans attacked and attached themselves to Black Freeman Indians who were wealthy, Alabama whites wanted a sort of guardianship over the \$2.5 million dollars for the hospital for black American soldiers. The attacks for control of the Veterans Hospital at Tuskegee were attacks on North America’s bastion of black pride - Tuskegee Institute, Dr. Robert Russa Moton, the country’s most powerful black leader, and on black American rights. The National Veterans Bureau, under the direction of Charles Forbes, had continuous scandals and Tuskegee was no different. At its inception in 1920, Veterans Hospital No. 91 in Tuskegee was in the middle of a battle for control over money and staffing. Andrew Mellon, who was then Secretary of the United States Treasury, approved \$2.5

¹⁸ Phillip Payne, *Dead Last* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009). 59.

million dollars for the construction of the Veterans Hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. Such money in the hands of blacks drew wolves. Gamble referred to letters from white Tuskegeens who believed that the fight over the hospital was for a test of the “supremacy of the white race” because white control was essential so as not to disturb race relations in the area. Alabama Governor William Brandon, Senator J. Heflin, and two state representatives W. Bowling and R. H. Powell supported the supremacy ideal.¹⁹

White Conflict at the Veterans Hospital

As *Black Wall Street* in Tulsa served as a national icon for black economic success, so did Tuskegee Institute serve as the most powerful black college in the nation. It was powerful because of its support by white philanthropists, and white leaders saw it as a place of accommodation. For blacks and whites in an earlier period Tuskegee Institute was more than just a university. Booker T. Washington (BTW) established both entities as centers for black reform. *Black Wall Street* in Tulsa lay in ruins due to white mob violence in June 1921. Tuskegee remained the proudest bastion of black education. To be the Tuskegee institute’s president or “principal” remained as a position of highest honor among black college presidents. In the 1920s, many black colleges, such as Howard University in Washington D. C., still had white presidents. President Theodore Roosevelt had believed “that the selection of a principal for Tuskegee Institute was as important a matter as the

¹⁹ Gamble, *Making A Place for Ourselves*, 90.

election of the president of the United States.”²⁰ When the opportunity to establish the black Veterans hospital on its campus, Tuskegee Institute needed protection. BTW covered up his covert support for legal disputes during his presidency. When Louis Harlan looked for a Sir Galahad in the Booker T. Washington papers, he found a black Machiavelli. Moton would soon learn to play the same tunes as BTW, he had to orchestrate the leadership that was needed during the crisis.

While Robert Russa Moton possessed an exclusive political power as the President of Tuskegee, in 1920, the most powerful elected Republican black politicians in the country, Howard Lincoln Johnson (1870-1925) and Perry Howard (1877-1961), lost their positions as decision makers and their ability to hold national offices when “lily white” – a call for “white superiority” – emerged in the Republican Party National Convention.²¹ Under Presidents Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover lily-whites reigned.²² The lily-white ideological strategy forced black politicians to discover different venues for the acquisition of money from political patronage. They reached within black society to Tuskegee looking for patronage deals but not before white Alabamans made their stand.

²⁰ Frederick Patterson William Hughes, *Robert Russa Moton of Hampton and Tuskegee*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), 79. Until his death in 1919, President Theodore Roosevelt sat on Board of Trustees for Tuskegee. During his presidency, he linked Tuskegee to the office of the President.

²¹ The term “lily white” originated at the 1888 Republican state convention in Fort Worth, Texas. Norris Wright Cuney, black Republican chair from 1883 until 1896, called the whites that drove blacks from their seats to achieve an all-white convention “lily-whites,” (chapter 4).

²² Alwyn Barr, *Reconstruction to Reform: Texas Politics, 1876-1906* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971); Donald Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks and Lily Whites* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina, 1985); Paul Casdorff, *Republicans, Negroes, and Progressives in the South, 1912-1916* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1981).

Whites in Alabama, supported by others in the nation, craved control over the hospital so much that the Klu Klux Klan staged a march near the Tuskegee campus with that purpose in mind. Money allocated for the hospital enticed whites to find a way to benefit from the hospital that had been built on a historically black college campus. Moton was considered as “a good, noble, strong man . . . hardened to abuse and misunderstanding.”²³ Albon Holsey, Moton’s secretary explained in a letter to the National Association for the Advancement Colored People (NAACP) that, “The sole interest of the white people in the hospital is economic. Aside from this; [sic] they do not wish to have a government institution in the state officered by Negroes because they realize that the colored people’s responsibility would be solely to the government, and they could not consistently control the situation in any respect. In other words and putting it bluntly as one Southern white man said, ‘If niggers are put at the head of this hospital, they’ll be responsible only to the United States government and we do not want any niggers in the state whom we cannot control.’”²⁴ Not all whites in the nation felt the same way as Alabamans. Gamble examined and chronicled that white newspapers and other white

²³ From Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton “The Work Goes On,” *Baltimore American Newspaper (Maryland)* 2 October 1920 from GC 60 4226 422a Tuskegee file Library of Congress.

²⁴ Albon Holsey to B. J. Davis, 30 May 1923, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People In Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Manuscript Division, C 419, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., (hereafter cited as NAACP.)

communities argued that white Alabamans did not fit the criteria of for Veterans affairs in this instance.²⁵

The Veterans Administration's dubious methods of functioning were typified in the problematic launch of the hospital in Tuskegee. In order to get permission to place the hospital for black veterans in Tuskegee, on August 18, 1921, Major W. N. Kenzie, liaison for Public Health Service, guaranteed a local committee of whites that the hospital would be "controlled and operated by white Southerners who were in touch with local conditions."²⁶ However, less than thirty days later, knowing of the promise Kenzie reported to the committee; the government's Consultants on Hospitalization also accepted three hundred acres for the hospital from Dr. Moton at Tuskegee Institute, with the understanding that black physicians would have some control and operation of the facility.

Calling the saga, *The Battle for the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital*, in her groundbreaking book, Vanessa Gamble alleged that William White, the chairman of the Consultants on Hospitalization, after receiving notice from Kenzie, deliberately misled Dr. Moton, "to guarantee his cooperation and not jeopardize the Tuskegee Institute gift" of three hundred acres.²⁷ The two misdeeds on the part of the government created a battlefield in Alabama, and eventually a battle around the country, over control of the hospital. Who had the right to staff the hospital and control the \$6500 for salaries each month? Bungled plans laid the foundation for the

²⁵ Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves*, 78.

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 94-95. Richard Powell, "How U. S. Government Broke Faith with Whites and Blacks of Tuskegee," *Birmingham Daily News*, 1 July 1923.

hospital. Indeed, Chisum uncovered and exploited the information in newspapers that it was illegal at that time in Alabama for white women to nurse blacks. The Veterans Bureau had already planned to have white nurses, and so they would have to hire black maids to attend the soldiers. When the hospital opened to admit black soldiers, white nurses made approximately \$1600 a month and the maids doing the actual work made \$50 a month.

By 1923, rumors circulated among blacks that white Alabamans had been promised that the hospital would be staffed by whites. To keep the truth from coming out Director Charles B. Forbes, craftily appointed Colonel T. Hugh Scott of Oklahoma, a white man, to work with Moton and Chisum, "building personnel of colored professionals to man the institution when ready for opening."²⁸ Because of the commitment of Forbes, and introduction to Colonel Hugh Scott, Chisum and Moton believed that blacks would indeed have most, if not total, control of the Veterans Hospital. Unfortunately, Scott continually made excuses for not meeting with them.

Divorced and remarried and a new father of Melvin Junior eleven months later, Chisum moved around the country frequently, accomplishing as many jobs or "missions" to keep his family financially stable. His wife Anne with a toddler and expecting their second child, retired as a nurse to take care of her family. Anne had attended Fredrick Douglass Nursing School in Baltimore. As with his first wife Mae, Chisum did not believe in his wife working once they married. Thus, the fifty year old needed steady income to take care of his family. He owned no business, had no

²⁸ *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 30 June 1923.

rich relatives, no educational background to perform as teacher or professor.

Chisum had to be always developing work for hire.

The loss of the ability to sell patronages affected his income after the Republican Party developed a “lily white” agenda. Patronage came in many forms including special dispensation for office holding, favors as well as money and political deals. For Chisum patronage was a way to keep steady income coming into his coffers. Patronages were income that a politician received from acquiring positions for a qualified candidate within reigning administration, whether it be the Democratic or the Republican Party. Until the 1920s blacks had found positions for other blacks in the Republican Party at a cost. With few blacks hired during the terms of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover this “graft” income stopped for Chisum and other black Republicans. Chisum continued to do investigative work or “missions” and also worked for big businesses as a private investigator or fixer.

On January 24, 1923, while on a mission as field secretary for the National Negro Press Association, Chisum explained that found a notice on the bulletin board in Veteran’s Hospital No. 65, (all white) in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The information in the field letter showed duplicity in the messages that Forbes, the Veterans Bureau, Scott, President Harding and Harding’s administrators had passed to him and Moton during special meetings. Reading the letter revealed to Chisum that blacks in the country had misinformation passed to them through Chisum and Moton regarding the placement of blacks in the new Veterans Hospital. The field letter from the United States Veterans Bureau read:

U. S. VETERANS BUREAU

FIELD LETTER

New Hospital at Tuskegee Institute

The new U.S. Veterans' Hospital for colored veterans at Tuskegee, Alabama, the finest of its kind in the world, is being constructed by the U. S. Treasury department, and will probably be completed between February 10 and 25. The sum allotted for the construction of this hospital by the Treasury Department was \$2,250,000.

The plans allow for about 600 beds, 302 tuberculosis patients and 294 for neuropsychiatric patients. The medical personnel will be composed of white persons. The Chief nurse, chief aids, chief dietitians and their assistants will be white. The staff nurses, aides and dietitians will probably be colored. The medical officer selected to take charge of his hospital will be from the Reserve Corps of the Public Health Service, of southern birth, and one who thoroughly understands the Negro.

The colored people of Tuskegee, and the superintendent and staff at Tuskegee Institute are giving government officials their hearty consideration.²⁹

What happened to separate but equal? Chisum and Moton understood and spread the word all over the country that "all black workers" would be appointed and hired. Knowing the scandals that overshadowed the Veterans Bureau, and that President Harding needed to be contacted, Chisum chose to go directly to Moton for assistance rather than inform Forbes of the situation. Chisum traveled from Tuskegee to Washington D.C., stopping at the office of George Christian, secretary (position now called Chief of Staff) to Harding.³⁰ Christian claimed that neither he,

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Payne, *Dead Last*, 59. Forbes had all the money from the Veterans Bureau and

nor President Harding, knew of the Veterans Bureau's notice to have white leadership. In essence, Forbes had lied to the blacks about the situation.

Moton and Chisum visited the Veterans Bureau on February 3, 1923. On Valentine's Day in 1923, President Moton sent a letter to President Harding explaining his embarrassment before American Blacks. Moton wrote President Harding that "Matters there seemed somewhat confused" about whether the hospital would be staffed by whites or blacks when they ventured into the director's office.³¹ Moton did not agree with all white staffing, but he would accommodate to concede to white leadership, with blacks being able to eventually qualify and take over. Blacks could not take the Civil Service exams to apply for positions at the Veterans Hospital. Giving them the ability do so was most important to Moton. Instead of demanding rights for blacks; Moton asked for the chance for black physicians and nurses to qualify without attempting to use the power of the office of the President of Tuskegee, whose support came from donations by philanthropists and the State of Alabama. The Tulsa riots and the fires and lynchings in Chicago had Moton questioning the feasibility of an all-black staff at the opening of the hospital. He ended the letter with a challenge to President Harding that, if they could not come to terms, "a storm of protest on the part of the Negro press and from Negroes North and South, [will arise] which I think would be most unfortunate."³²

used it for his own systems of patronage and felonious activity.

³¹ Robert Russa Moton to President Warren G. Harding 14 February 1923, NAACP files, Manuscript Division Library of Congress.

³² Moton to President Warren G. Harding, 14 February 1923, NAACP.

In the mean time Moton wrote to James Weldon Johnson a “very confidential” letter. He needed the backing of the NAACP. Moton mentioned his letter to Harding writing, “I mean to see this matter through in a way that will be satisfactory to us, or else I shall have to go before the country and put the blame upon the Republican Party and the Harding Administration.”³³ Like his predecessor, Booker T. Washington, Moton grappled between accommodation to keep Tuskegee and blacks in Alabama safe and or whether to demand immediate action from the government. He settled on accommodation. Black leaders in the 1920s, including Chisum, did not agree with Moton’s choice. The most powerful black Republican politician in the country Henry Lincoln Johnson, a Republican National Committeeman for over twelve years did not back down when the Republican Party gave him an ultimatum. Even he had to be dragged out. Now Morton, the most powerful black in the position of leadership, had fallen to accommodating? Possibly Moton mused that “lily” whites stripped Johnson of all his power. Could it happen at Tuskegee? Moton was not willing to take the chance.

Black leaders in the country went on a rampage against Moton’s leadership of blacks in the United States. Chisum honored his friendship with Moton. Black leaders struggled intra-racially to maintain justice and reform in the 1920s. Although all blacks did not agree on the right way to staff the Veterans Hospital, friendships were important to them, as they were the men who made decisions for their race. In the fashion of a black progressive, Chisum did not agree with Moton’s approach to the situation at Tuskegee Veterans Hospital; and he urged Moton to

³³ Robert Russa Moton to James Weldon Johnson, 19 February 1923, NAACP.

push rigidly for an all black staff and doctors. He wrote to Moton, “come on over on the Negro Race’s [sic] side where you belong,” yet, Chisum remained faithful to Moton as a friend and leader of blacks despite Moton having chosen another path. “You may be sure that I love you as a dear brother – time and distance make no difference between you and me – you are aware that I love you faithfully and am eternally interested in all which concerns you.”³⁴ These were the words Chisum wrote to Moton warning him about a political acquaintance. “I am not going to make any pleas for Congressman Mitchell because you have your own ideas as I know but they don’t interfere with our friendship,” Moton returned in his letter.³⁵ Theirs was a friendship that could stand disagreement. Moton returned to the practices of Booker T. Washington, he put the focus on the grass roots blacks that might get hurt, not on the talented tenth who wanted immediate justice. He did not have the Tuskegee Machine to back him (Emmett Scott was not his loyal assistant) nor did he have the National Business League. The Business League, the black public, NAACP, and newspapers campaigned against Moton for his stance of accommodation.

Attempting to save Moton’s reputation and standing among blacks, on June 30, 1923, Chisum placed all correspondence in the Moton and NAACP files between the Harding administration and the Veterans Bureau, including personal applications for positions in the Veterans Hospital, in the *Pittsburg Courier Newspaper*. These letters did not exonerate Moton’s decisions about

³⁴ Melvin Chisum to Robert Moton, 20 January 1936, Robert Russa Morton Papers, Tuskegee University Archives, Tuskegee, Alabama, folder MJCSR1924. Hereafter cited as Moton Papers.

³⁵ Robert Moton to Melvin Chisum, 12 May 1936, Moton Papers.

accommodation, but did give a clearer picture of the situation, including the duplicity of government agencies towards blacks. The two-page-spread delineated the steps taken by Chisum and Moton towards getting an all black staff for the hospital.

On July 1, Moton made another bold move in an effort to keep Tuskegee from getting attacked by racists. In a letter to the new director of Veterans Bureau, Brigadier General Frank Hines, Moton wrote, "if Negroes are put in charge of the hospital, there is no doubt in my own mind that there will be serious trouble, which may mean the destruction sooner or later of much property or serious bloodshed, and, the far-reaching effect on the relations of the races in the South."³⁶ The NAACP cut off involvement with Tuskegee Institute and the hospital affair in protest of Moton's stance for accommodation. Chisum stood in the gap.

Even Moton's secretary let out confidential information to the press. In between missions, working for others beyond the government and Tuskegee, Chisum hounded Holsey - across country and back - until he could get "three heads together," he, Holsey and Moton.³⁷ Cornered by Chisum, Albon Holsey, Moton's secretary, (much unlike the relationship of Scott to Booker T. Washington) confessed to giving out negative information that reached the *Washington Post Newspaper*. In regards to Moton, Holsey admitted that he made a "violation of confidence."³⁸ Though Chisum did not agree with Moton's stance of compromise with the Veterans Bureau; he "never failed a friend." However, Chisum ridiculed

³⁶ Robert Russa Moton to Frank T. Hines, 1 July 1923, Moton Papers.

³⁷ Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton, 1 September 1923, Moton Papers.

³⁸ Albon Holsey to Melvin Chisum, 11 August 1923, Moton Papers.

Moton's position as fearful. According to historian Gamble, Chisum wrote to Brigadier General Hines, that Moton was "intimidated by the Alabama Klu Klux Klan."³⁹ When the information in the letter was purposefully leaked and came back to Moton, blacks in the National Business League, a group set up by Booker T. Washington that focused on black business, attempted to use the letter to separate Moton and Chisum. The separation could have been the downfall of Moton. But the friendship stood when politics separated them. Chisum did not back away from Moton but stuck to his principles. When Chisum believed in something, he was immovable; but it did not negate his loyalty to friends who disagreed.⁴⁰ Once his statement about Moton's fears went public, Chisum chose friendship over power.

He left a National Business League meeting when people formed a committee to work against Moton. Chisum wrote, "I know that people who prefer to see you and me apart as friends would swear by all the gods that it [the meeting] was Chisum's work, and I missed the one session that I would like most to have attended to avoid being further lied about to you."⁴¹ According to his son, Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., Chisum's principles separated him from other men. "My Dad lived and died by his principles." Chisum chose to be forthright. As a friend to Moton, he explained his understanding of the truth in the way the Duke of Warwick would advise a King:

What you need Dr. Moton is not the foolish flattery of men who are afraid to disagree with you, you need at this time as every man who wields power

³⁹ Gamble, *Making A Place for Ourselves*, 97.

⁴⁰ Anne Chisum Johnson to Author, 23 November 2007. Chisum Papers. Dulaney – Browne Library, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma, (hereafter cited as OKCU.)

⁴¹ Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton, 25 August 1924. Melvin Chisum Files, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama, General Correspondence (GC) 191-CA-C1-MCJSR, Morton Papers.

needs, you need counsel of men who have their hands on the pulse of the people, men who are bold and unafraid. I am saying this because I know a good deal more than you realize that I know, and much of it would be of service if those who see through horse blinds would let you alone and quit fooling you as to what the People are thinking and saying about you . . . I appeal to you as your friend to hold a bit and get down on the ground and listen to the storm of bitter resentment against you in this hospital situation amongst our people, is a thing too definite and too substantial to be ignored and I beg you to quit the course which you have been pursuing for the last six months and call around you those men who love you, who love the Race, who are true to you and no less true to the Race.⁴²

Because of Moton's links with the Republican Party and his need for support from white philanthropists he ultimately retreated from the outright battle for the staffing of the hospital. Under attack Morton used the tactics of Booker T. Washington, steering the polemics of equality and justice away from the University; he told the press that the fight was in the hands of people. "The fight had to come through the press," his secretary Albon Holsey wrote to James Weldon Johnson.

In Alabama, the fight for blacks to staff the hospital became a test of the supremacy Anglo-Saxon race against American Blacks at the bastion of black power. As in Oklahoma in first decade of the twentieth century, the Army of Lions roared into action. While Moton barricaded his home, black newspapers, the NAACP, called for no compromise in the situation at Tuskegee. Moton played the role of compromiser while supporting the fight. Slowly over the period of a year black doctors, nurses, staff and patients gradually took all the positions. Historian Vanessa Gamble in *Making a Place for Ourselves* (1995), pointed to several factors for the

⁴² Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton, 1 September 1923. Moton Papers.

win; the united efforts of among blacks, the work of General Hines, the appointment of Dr. Joseph Ward as chief surgeon and the national black community learning to fight together. Perhaps, Gamble's greatest point was that nationally whites did not agree with the southern mentality to attack a black enclave. It was non – traditional in the South for whites to step out of their place into a black enclave.

While Chisum worked with Moton dealing with intra black conflicts he worked with George Christian and another unknown informant to solve what had become a great circus of errors. The emerging relationship, friendship, between Chisum and George B. Christian, secretary to the President Harding (bulwark between president and the public) and one of the politicians who instigated “lily white,” reveals that even though politics of white supremacy kept men of different races apart in public, in private sessions, issues of justice brought men as different as Chisum and other white Republicans together. President Harding also met personally with black groups, despite the fact that white politicians risked losing votes if the public knew they collaborated with blacks. Because Christian and Bascom Slep started the “lily white” rhetoric, Harding needed to precede with caution in his developing relationship with Chisum, Harding could not afford to lose votes because he aided blacks.⁴³ Correspondence shows how Chisum moving around the capital, a ghostly figure in offices of senators and in the presidential chamber, made a difference in race matters.

The first letters dealing with Tuskegee were stilted correspondence showing that Chisum was Moton's “man-of-affairs,” taking care of correspondence in Moton's

⁴³ Melvin Chisum to George Christian, 28 February 1923. NAACP.

stead. In response to the line found in the field letter about “a southern white man who understands Negroes,” Chisum and Christian corresponded from January until the debacle between whites and Tuskegee was over in July. The statement in the field letter that said “medical officer selected to take charge of his hospital will be from the Reserve Corps of the Public Health Service, of southern birth, and one who thoroughly understands the Negro,” unnerved the black population, and prompted Chisum to discuss it with whites.

No details remain of Chisum’s visits to the white house -- just as within the Booker T. Washington papers -- some letters only reflect the meetings on benches and unknown places. On February 28, 1922 Chisum wrote to Christian “The southerner who “thoroughly” understands the Negro is one who orders, dictates and browbeats the Negro, and never allows the Negro to express a wish as to what he himself feels is best for himself.” However on February 23, 1923 Chisum wrote Christian a “sincere personal” letter in wording Chisum reserved for his friends. During the correspondence, distrust turned into respect between the two men.

One of Chisum’s most important informers from the Veterans Bureau, who called himself G.B., took the idea a step further and looked at his own life. G.B.’s response tells about Chisum’s character, how as a black man Chisum broke down barriers and made changes in the hearts of men when they actually got to be in relationship with each other beyond the color line. In fact, this correspondence with Chisum changed the status of the entire Tuskegee battle because G.B. gave pertinent information on the Veterans Bureau to turn the case in Tuskegee’s favor.

Tho' I am a southerner and have all the traditional prejudices of decent Southerners, I never have hated colored people, nor will I ever be a party to any schemes against them simply because they are of the colored race. The information which I am about to give you is of a most delicate nature and there are not many men of my own color with whom I would trust it, but you, though a colored man, are one of the squarest men whom I have known, and since you said that the answers to your questions would be of great and valuable service, I am handing it out to you for the purpose of helping you.⁴⁴

Why did Chisum stand out among other black men fighting for justice? Even though he could be diabolical, it was his intrinsic character – internal integrity of purpose - that eventually turned men toward him and caused them to help him in his goals. His goals were race goals.

Uncovering Black Political Espionage at Tuskegee

The story of the whites against blacks at Tuskegee is better known than the issues of intra-racial conflict. However, black politicians forced out of their positions in the Republican Party during the administration of President Warren Harding attempted to inject themselves in the Tuskegee venture to regain prestige and money. They used chaos in the background and racism in the forefront, to manipulate their way to their enrichment. Racism was at the center of the battles over the staffing of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital No. 91, but it was not the cause of all the conflicts. Within the black world some men were spies while others were crooks.

⁴⁴ G.B. to Melvin Chisum, 30 June 1923. NAACP.

A story within a story, Chisum's work uncovering sabotage in the Tuskegee crisis did not go unnoticed. In the article "Black Power in the 1920s: The Case of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," Pete Daniel mentioned how two "Negro politicians . . . attempted to gain the confidence of Harding and then install their men at Tuskegee, undoubtedly expecting to make the most of the payroll and the supplies that went to the hospital."⁴⁵ Chisum uncovered the work of his fellow Lincoln League of America co-patriots Henry Lincoln Johnson and Perry Howard. Contrasting Chisum with politicians Johnson and Howard, shows how all three black politicians reacted to racial oppression when faced with loss of privileges and patronage.

The rise of "lily whites" in the Republican Party at the end of the Progressive Era not only forced the final segregation of black Republicans who continued to hold positions in local, state, and national caucuses, it also forced black politicians to find different venues for political and social control within the black community.⁴⁶ Stripped of the security of national and state Republican chairmanships, at the 1920 Republican National Convention, two of the most powerful Republican Negro politicians Henry Lincoln Johnson "Linc" (1870-1925) and Perry Howard (1877-1961).

Henry Lincoln Johnson, a Republican committeeman from Georgia, maintained a measure of national position by controlling six electoral votes. Perry

⁴⁵ Daniel, *Black Power in the 1920s*, 374.

⁴⁶ The term "lily white" originated at the 1888 Republican state convention in Fort Worth, Texas. Norris Wright Cuney, black Republican chair from 1883 until 1896, called the mutineers who tried to drive blacks from their seats to achieve an all-white convention "lily-whites."

www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fcu20.

Howard, a “Black and Tan” Republican committeeman from Mississippi, and once special assistant attorney general; Black-and-Tans descended from Southern Grand Old Party of the Reconstruction era blacks and whites who supported a more inclusive party. Norris Cuney, Emmett Scott’s former boss before Booker T. Washington, was elected the first party chairman in 1886. Cuney eventually was stripped of national power through lily-white racial bigotry. Henry Johnson and Perry Howard attempted to gain control in the last stronghold of black power, Tuskegee Alabama.⁴⁷ Following the convention, both men lost their positions that allowed them the ability to make money through the patronage system. Johnson led the Black and Tan Faction of the Republican Party in Georgia and was appointed by President William Taft as Recorder of Deeds in Washington D.C. 1909-1913. Under Woodrow Wilson, for whom “Linc” campaigned, “lilly whites” then ousted blacks from party leadership. Perry Howard led a distinguished career as a Black and Tan Republican committeeman from Mississippi. They both used the raging crisis of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital in an attempt to rebuild their own credibility. Together as Republican Party representatives they went to President Harding to get the power to hire for the Veterans Hospital. They both resumed their livelihoods as lawyers in Washington D.C.

Initially, black politicians put their faith in President Harding because on the campaign trail in 1920, when he visited with black Republicans in Oklahoma, in

⁴⁷ See, J Morgan Koussar, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One Party South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

front of a crowd of fifteen hundred people, Harding stated, "You can't give one right to a white man and deny it to a black man. I believe in the enforcement of the constitution. Don't you?" Blacks believed the rhetoric of "lily white" would only last during the presidential election. Among those who gathered in the office of the president, Chisum, Johnson, and Howard heard Harding's announcement before he passed it to the press. However, in 1920, soon after the Republican national primary chose Warren Harding as their candidate, in a premeditated but subtle act of bravado to bring more Southern whites to the Republican Party, Republicans Bascom Slemp and George Christian led a revolt of white politicians against southern black political leaders within the Republican Party.

White racism in the form of "lily white" forced Harding's rhetoric to change after his inauguration in 1921. Before telling the press, in an apologetic manner, Harding explained in a closed meeting to a black caucus of Republicans that sat before him that his administration would follow the white supremacy agenda.⁴⁸ When the black caucus left, rumors of his decision leaked. In complete unbelief, local Washington NAACP men Archibald Grimke, Sheldon Davidson, Charles Cottrill and James Cobb camped in the sweltering summer heat in Washington waiting for President Harding to return from vacation and hear the details for themselves.⁴⁹ Under duress Harding decided, "I am very thoroughly convinced in my mind as to the policy that I am going to inaugurate with reference to appointments, and that is,

⁴⁸ "Many Rumors In Washington, Few Appointments Definite, Executive Committee Formed to Maintain National Headquarters At Washington [sic]," *Savannah Tribune* (Georgia), 12 March 1921.

⁴⁹ "Divided on President's Statement," *Negro Star* (Kansas), 5 August 1921.

I am not going to appoint any colored men to public office in the southern states. This thing called race prejudice you cannot down by battling it and the only solution as I see it, for the colored men in the South, is to fall into ranks behind white leadership until he can, acting through Southern legislatures, work out his destiny.”⁵⁰ Harding continued the same policy in the North with very minor exceptions. According to the *Washington Bee* newspaper, to stop black Republicans’ outcry for someone to get an “office of first rank” one black man, Charles Anderson, a former spy for Booker T. Washington, was appointed to the old third District in New York as internal Revenue Collector.⁵¹

In a world of heightened racial consciousness, Henry Johnson and Perry Howard’s powerful positions in the Republican Party up to 1920 had the effect of an “egg sitting on a wall” to southern white politicians. They had to fall. Johnson and Howard’s positions in the pre-1920s “Grand Old Party” made them akin to black monarchs because within their home states of Georgia and Mississippi they had as much power and authority over the election of a party’s candidates as Northern white men and more than many Southern white politicians -- that is until the 1920 Republican National Convention. While they welded this power, they also muddied themselves with much political dirt since they were in the midst of as many patronage scandals, fraudulent schemes, and money laundering as their white

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Charles W. Anderson to be Internal Revenue Collector.” *Washington Bee*, 9 July 1921. See also “Dispatch Received from Political Correspondent,” *Savannah Tribune*, (Savannah), 23 July 1921.

contemporaries in the white world.⁵² Johnson and Howard for a time could do no wrong and when they were caught, they did not get punished. Johnson “had a reputation for selling federal appointments in his position as a member of the Republican National Committee and as a recorder of deeds. In 1912–1913, he was charged with soliciting political subscriptions and violating civil service law when he was a collector of internal revenue in Atlanta.”⁵³ Violating laws did not remove politicians like Johnson from office. If anything, he thought it made him one of the “good old boys.”⁵⁴

No one could obtain a federal appointment in Mississippi “without the support of said Perry W. Howard.”⁵⁵ Perry Howard ran a political machine in Mississippi fraught with patronage abuse. The federal government tried and indicted Howard twice for sale of patronage in Mississippi. Men paid Howard up to

⁵² See Neil McMillen, "Perry W. Howard, Boss of Black-and-Tan Republicanism in Mississippi 1924-1960," *The Journal of Southern History* XLVIII, no. 2 (1982). And see Olive Shadgett. *The Republican Party in Georgia From Reconstruction Through 1900* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1964), 132-133.

⁵³ Robert Hill, *The Marcus Garve and Universal Negro Improvement Papers* ed. Robert Hill, vol. IV (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

⁵⁴ Johnson and Howard’s political programs contradicted the average two party system’s chain of power in the segregated South. As far back as the Civil War blacks aligned with the politics and goals of the Republican Party. By the first half of the twentieth-century, the white to black patronage characterized the dominant mode of upward mobility in black politics. Blacks and whites of the Party carried on a symbiotic relationship. By the first half of the twentieth century the white to black patronage characterized the dominant mode of upward mobility in black politics. Whites needed the black vote in order to win. Blacks who could gather the votes from their constituency were the blacks that obtained offices as part of the spoils system. These men passed on political favors to other black politicians and businessmen. This effort gave blacks the idea that the ballot served as a safeguard for their liberties. This false sense of protection eventually created a false sense of stable ground in a racist world. The Johnson and Howard political bases were all black constituencies. They did not need the white vote to have their positions.

⁵⁵ McMillen. 136.

\$2,500 for political patronage positions.⁵⁶ It was not a problem to Howard, who sometimes passed for white, that Mississippi had more black people than white but less than 1,700 blacks were eligible to vote. He not only looked white but whites treated him like a white politician in Mississippi. Unlike Chisum and Johnson, he lobbied against basic black justice issues such as the Dyer Anti Lynching Bill. Walter White, secretary of the NAACP wrote, "There are Negroes like Perry Howard who for the sake of personal gain would knife every Negro in the country."⁵⁷ According to Boris Heersink and Jeffery A. Jenkins professors in the Department of Politics at the University of Virginia, unlike other southern states, the lily-whites never took over the Black-and-Tans in Mississippi under Perry Howard, "In fact, between 1892 and 1952 Mississippi's delegation was majority black with only on exception (1920, when 45.8% of delegates were black.)⁵⁸

Howard and Johnson's political aspirations differed little from those of Melvin Chisum. While Chisum claimed his power and prestige by his darker shadow ghosting through the congressional halls and presidents' administrative offices, Johnson and Howard displayed their power through taking patronage money from

⁵⁶ Blacks were not the only politicians selling patronage positions. Joseph Tolbert an Anglo Black-and-Tan from South Carolina allegedly sold offices for as much \$2000. See "Tolbert Denies Sale of Offices," *New York Times* (New York), 1 August 1922. "Sale of Patronage in South Carolina Charged at Hearing," *Washington Post* (*Washington D.C.*, 31 October 1924. "Tolbert Reappointment Seen Unconstitutional," *Washington Post* (*Washington D.C.*), 10 March 1923. Boris Heersink and Jeffrey Jenkins, "Black-and-Tans vs. Lily-Whites: Race and Republican Party Organization in the South After Reconstruction, 1868-1952," in *2016 Annual Meeting of the Political Science Association* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2016).

⁵⁷ Walter White to S. D. Redmond, 8 January 1923. NAACP.

⁵⁸ Heersink and Jenkins, "Black-and-Tans Vs. Lilly-Whites: Race and Republican Party Organization in the South After Reconstruction, 1868-1952," 172.

the highest bidders. Johnson was a race man. Howard claimed whatever was beneficial to him. Chisum was an independent doing what was best for him.

Eventually, even Johnson found it was hard to be a king in a kingdom created by your oppressors. To topple Johnson and Howard, Republicans had to institute white supremacy. Johnson controlled six electoral votes in Georgia. When he gave them for Taft for President in 1910, Johnson was given the appointment of Recorder of Deeds for Washington D.C. Johnson developed such power that like his white colleagues, his misdeeds never resulted in punishment. Racism caused Johnson's downfall. In 1920 less successful whites from Georgia, those whom he had left behind in the 1880s, coveted his position. Republican "lily white" was the tool that brought down such a powerful man.

Unlike many black republicans, physically ejected from their seats after the acceptance of lily-white by the party, Johnson could not at first be unseated on the state level or national level because his control of electoral votes gave him too much authority. The *Negro Star Newspaper* reported, "No man in recent years outrank [sic] him in political cunning and power."⁵⁹ Due to his high ranking in the Republican Party and as part of a deal for him to hold a patronage position, President Harding nominated Johnson as Recorder of Deeds. The *New York Times* reported that "Johnson has been a storm center in Republican politics recently and the belief prevails that he was nominated for the Recorder of Deeds as a preliminary

⁵⁹ Henry Johnson dies After A Stroke: Was Former Recorder of Deeds and G.O.P. Committeeman." *Negro Star*, 18 August 1925.

to suggesting that he resign as National Committeeman from Georgia.”⁶⁰ The charges (of a political nature) made against him are not worthy of much attention, as far as we are able to see.”⁶¹ Johnson refused to resign from being Republican National Committeeman. He became the first African American called before a Senate Committee Subcommittee.

August 1921 was a year of disasters for black Republicans. On August 2, President Warren Harding died. That same month Johnson suffered a stroke “being attacked so suddenly he was but able to call for help over the telephone.”⁶² However, he still went before the Senate and testified before a Senate committee. A subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Privileges and Elections investigated him for fraudulent presidential campaign spending. “Johnson admitted that he accepted \$9,000 of the \$20,000 spent by the Lowden forces in Georgia but declared that supporters of General Leonard Wood for the nomination had spent between \$60,000 and \$65,000 in that state.” Congress rejected the Johnson nomination. Johnson’s claim to the “good old boy” privileges no longer existed.

Seeking to keep some power, Johnson and Howard set up an operation in Washington D. C. to deceive black leaders and make money through patronage by using the Veterans Hospital. When Moton first requested Harding to supply the

⁶⁰ “Harding Gives Post to Lincoln Johnson: Nomination of Negro for District of Columbia Recorder May Cause Row in Senate,” *New York Times* (New York), 29 June 1921.

⁶¹ *Cleveland Gazette* (Cleveland), 27 August 1921. “Lily Whiteism [sic] on Rampage Appears to the Republican Program for the South.” *Savannah Tribune* (Georgia), 4 June 1921.

⁶² “Harry Lincoln Johnson Stricken for Paralysis [sic]. Colored Republican Leader Nominated for Recorder of Deeds.” *Washington Bee*, (Washington), 3 August 1921.

Veterans Hospital with all blacks he made a move that would later embarrass him and frustrate black leaders. According to memorandum from May 1923 meeting:

Harding summoned Henry Lincoln Johnson and requested him to get in touch with leaders of his race to determine upon a slate which could be immediately put in charge of the Tuskegee Hospital. Instead of doing as the president requested according to Mr. Holsey's direct statement, Mr. Johnson saw an opportunity to use the Tuskegee Hospital matter as a means of regaining confidence of the colored people for himself, Perry Howard and other Negro politicians. The plan was to get the hospital in their control as a sort of "pie counter." Through the control of appointments to the hospital, Messrs. Johnson, Howard and Roscoe Simmons, et al, determined to purchase support of appointees which would be valuable in view of the 1924 Presidential election.⁶³

Chisum aided Tuskegee Veterans Hospital and the government as much as spying helped Booker T. Washington's administration. Chisum discovered Howard and Perry's plans and set up Holsey to get the reinstated in the eyes of Moton. Herbert Seligman, secretary of the NAACP, knew that Chisum discovered the conspiracy. However, he did not know why Holsey solved the situation rather than Chisum. Maybe for Chisum it was part of the deal after saving Moton during the hospital crisis. Or with Chisum something that paid actually came up in the interim. Whatever, Chisum wrote: "I found a commission awaiting me which took me away from Washington immediately with the result, I was compelled to suspend my activities in the Veterans Bureau business temporarily but before going I dispatched a call to Mr. Holsey, which bought him to Washington to take my place and he did a

⁶³ "Memorandum of Conference Between John E. Nail, Albon L Holsey and Walter F. White," 7 May 1923. NAACP.

bang up job, better than I would have done it.”⁶⁴ As a provocateur sometimes Chisum purposely disappeared, leaving criminals, he was of the same ilk, or in difficulty with the law. This tactic helped him to retain his anonymity and keep his cover.

Holsey stood outside and listened then walked into Howard’s office and discovered Henry Johnson, Perry Howard, and another republican, Roscoe Simmons, making plans to control the hiring of the Veterans Hospital. At that point, the three refused to stop their interference, claiming President Harding gave them authority. Holsey sent out a press release denying that Johnson, Howard and Simmons were handling the applications. Finally, the only way to get the group to stop was going to the director of the Veterans Bureau. “General Hines summoned Johnson and read him the riot act to him on his cock-sureness over the suggestion made to him by the President.”⁶⁵ It was reported that Johnson and Howard did not have President Harding’s backing. They were only supposed to give lists of their constituents for positions in the hospital to the committee of Holsey, White and Chisum.

“Oklahoma, sit alone and talk and watch a hawk make lazy circles in the sky!”⁶⁶

The elimination of the influence of Johnson and Howard would not be the final prong of powerful blacks attempting to infiltrate the Tuskegee Veterans

⁶⁴ Melvin Chisum to Herbert Seligman, 15 May 1923. NAACP.

⁶⁵ Albon Holsey to Dr. George Cannon, 4 May 1923. NAACP.

⁶⁶ Dianna Everett, *"Oklahoma!" The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, www.okhistory.org (accessed September 29, 2018).

hospital. The final attack came from within the environs of the newly hired black community. Information on the investigation comes from a confidential report Chisum submitted to the Veterans Bureau in 1926. Instead of going into the investigation as a Machiavellian; Chisum went in as Svengali with the evil intent to hypnotize and manipulate the villains. No magic or sorcery needed; Chisum's first mission for BTW in 1914 aided Chisum as detective.

Over the years, Chisum's investigations garnered reputations on both the good side of the law and the wrong side. Sometimes he acted as a fixer, kingmaker, and race-man; and on the other side, he fitted Prattis' description of him as "secretive and unprincipled." He was not one or the other but all of them plus more. Shape shifting as easily as a Celtic spirit he could be a Chicago underworld mobster in one moment in 1915 Oklahoma, and a "yes sir" saying, Uncle Tom, the next. His last mission at Tuskegee Veterans hospital shows a technique that Chisum could use -- Svengali. In the 1895 novel by George du Maurier, *Trilby*, the role of Svengali was of a man who through hypnosis could use his voice to subjugate and transform another human, making them no more than pawns to him. More than the role of provocateur, a person who provokes trouble or causes agitation, Chisum's past life shows how one became effective in dealing with situations only another criminal mind could discern. In the eyes of scoundrels, in the first quarter of the twentieth-century when they saw Chisum, they saw a king of the underworld. This information comes from a *Confidential Report to the Veterans Administration* to the Veterans Bureau written by Chisum March 10, 1926. The report is unusual. It is one of the first delineated reports written by Chisum other than his letters to General Hines

during World War I. It shows his adherence to working within and adhering to an organized establishment.

A problem with doing historiography is that in twentieth-century history, Oklahoma's standing, as a major black enclave in the nation, remains underscored. Too much attention is cast to the East while what happened in Oklahoma is neglected. In Oklahoma, one found the rise of all black towns, several personal visits of BTW from 1905 to the National Negro Business League meeting held in 1914; Oklahomans who helped established the business league; the richest blacks in the world were Oklahomans in the early teens; and one of three black college presidents. Dr. Isaac William Young's held the nation's first black assistant governorship, and BTW's establishment of banks and Black Wall Street carried vast national implications for black nationalism. A paradigm shift in historical narrative would show how Oklahoma and black Oklahomans led the nation throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. Yet the information instead of being a major building block in the nation's history is treated as mortar instead of a major building block. Certainly, following the life of Chisum demonstrates that Oklahoma was central in Black Nationalism, just as Black Wall Street and the Tulsa Race Massacre was central in politics in the first quarter of the twentieth-century.

During the period 1914 - 1916, when Chisum was run out of Oklahoma on a charge of criminal libel, he met William Jones and Dr. J. D. Nelson. Chisum's reputation from the Inman Page affair at the Colored Agriculture and Normal

University (Langston University) drew attention all over the nation.⁶⁷ Chisum's infamous jump from a train in the state of Oklahoma to get away from law enforcement that put a network of police and marshals out to catch him became legend in the country.⁶⁸ Chisum carried out his last mission for Booker T. Washington in Oklahoma, and did some of his own personal investigation against Inman Page while in Oklahoma. Chisum's reputation from the Inman Page affair at the *Colored Agriculture and Normal University* (Langston University) drew attention all over the nation.⁶⁹ He eventually got away by riding a train to Muskogee where his friends helped him catch a train. In 1916 along with other newspapers around the country, the *Denver Star* corrected the episode. Once known for libel Chisum became known as a hero. They wrote, "Melvin J. Chisum known as the hero of "Langston University," in Oklahoma has at last won his great fight for better conditions in that institution, and many civil and criminal actions instituted against him have come to naught since the governor has pardoned Chisum in the only case that has been made to stick. Mr. Chisum's fight was for moral elevation in the management of the school."⁷⁰ Jones knew of the episode. Jones saw Chisum's new hero status as that of a

⁶⁷ *Oklahoma Tribune*, (Oklahoma), 15 August 1915. OKCU. "Editor Chisum Pardoned and Paroled By Court After the Judge discovered the Charges Upon Which He was Convicted Were True," *Philadelphia Tribune*, (Philadelphia), 13 January 1917. "News Bureau Promotor," *Denver Star*, (Denver), 13 January 1917. "Negro Editor is released on Bond," *Fort Gibson Gazette*, (Fort Gibson Oklahoma) 2 March 1916. "Chisum is Vindicated," *Denver Star*, (Denver, Colorado) 28 October 1916. "Chisum Again in the Toils," *Afro American*, (Baltimore Maryland), 15 September 1916.

⁶⁸ Robert Russa Moton, *Finding a Way Out: An Autobiography* (London: Adelphi Terrace: T. Fisher Unwin LTD., 1920).

⁶⁹ *Oklahoma Tribune* (Oklahoma), 15 August 1915.

⁷⁰ "Melvin J. Chisum to Enter Chisolm [sic] Service at Denison, Texas," *Denver Star*, (Denver), 21 October 1916.

great conman who won against inordinate odds. Chisum knew Jones as a slick con artist. But like Prattis, Jones believed Chisum was the slickest of his generation.

In 1926 when Chisum attended the annual National Negro Business League meeting held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he gathered information about a schism in the inner bowels of the Tuskegee Veterans hospital. Only a man who traveled as extensively in the black world and between all political worlds of the United States, such as Chisum, could put together information and know how to use it. He learned that men, who had embezzled from black Oklahoma civic organizations, shifted their work from Boley and Taft, Oklahoma, to Tuskegee, Alabama. The men held powerful positions at the new veterans hospital. He did not set out for Washington or Tuskegee. On the way to get the commission for handling Tuskegee he stopped in Richmond, Virginia for an Elks meeting and went home to his family.

The investigation into the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital for the Veteran's Bureau was a mission. The report was done as a narrative. By 1924, the workers at the institution were all black. The hospital was turned over to Dr. Joseph H. Ward as medical doctor in charge. The chief engineer of the Veterans Hospital, William Jones, a black man from Oklahoma, filed several charges against Dr. Ward's administration with the local and national Veteran's Bureau. The charges included serving a luncheon for black physicians out of Veteran funds, building garages for staff physicians, Dr. Ward's use of hospital gas in his private car and the use of hospital vehicles to haul equipment for entertainment, sharing the water supply with the

University and allowing Moton to dominate the Veterans hospital affairs.⁷¹ The Veterans Bureau and President Coolidge's administration called Melvin Chisum to deal with the in-house problems. Because of his work in the Oklahoma earlier in the first quarter of the twentieth century it proved easy to deal with the mission. Chisum only had to check into the hotel, swagger around the grounds, talk about the hospital with people of Tuskegee, and wait.

Jones assumed Chisum was looking for graft. Soon Jones contacted Chisum through a yardman who worked for the Veterans Hospital. Jones requested he and the yard-man Mr. Yates meet with Chisum at 10 pm in Chisum's hotel room. Chisum wrote, "I promptly adjusted my attitude to meet his wishes in order that he would talk with more freedom." Jones planned on using the newspapers to slowly destroy Dr. Ward's reputation. Only ten years prior to the month Melvin Chisum used the Oklahoma *Tribune* newspaper to destroy the reputation of President Inman Page of Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University. In his position of field secretary of the NNPA Chisum could aid Jones in doing the same for Dr. Ward. However, Chisum, all knowing, said, "Bill, you are stalling. You are playing a deeper game than you have told me. Now, if you want me to help you play your game, you must let me in all the way." After asking Chisum if he "wanted to make some real money" and ascertaining his "yes" Jones gave Chisum the information he needed to solve the problems at the Veterans Hospital. Jones' scheme was to frame Dr. Ward, Mr. Roney, Property Custodian, and Mr. Burke, Business Executive. The move in Dr.

⁷¹ Melvin J. Chisum, "(Confidential) the Faithful Narrative of an Investigation of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," in *National Negro Press Association*, ed. Washington D. C. (Chicago: National Negro Press Association, 1926). 2. NAACP.

J. D. Nelson, Jones' colleague from Oklahoma, into the post, Mr. Yates into Mr. Roney's place and Chisum could have Mr. Burke's place. Jones believed "Hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent here every year for supplies, and with our men in charge here, we can clean up and retire in five years." Chisum agreed to the scheme and delved into fixing the matter.⁷² After all, Chisum had claimed patronage money for getting the patronage position for Dr. Ward. Acting as Jones' ally Chisum subtly turned things around. Carefully over a period of days Chisum went along with Jones' plans as one who would become involved with Jones' espionage.

Leaving Tuskegee Chisum wrote to Jones that he would do all that was needed however. He would see a senator related to the matter. However, "By the way, I seem to have lost the slip of paper on which I wrote his initials, and I do not recall them. Kindly provide them immediately, so that I may include his full name, and wait for the bell to ring." Jones answered immediately, "My dear Melvin . . . Those initials are J.D. Dr. J.D. Nelson, of Oklahoma. ..." ⁷³ Jones own letter implicated him.

Chisum accumulated statements about Jones and Nelson from two judges in Oklahoma. The information was that while in Boley, Oklahoma, Jones "stole everything he could get his hands on . . . He got the city to contract with him to build

⁷² Ibid., 3-5. NAACP.

⁷³ Ibid., 10. NAACP.

a City Water Works plant. We spent \$49,000 on the project, but we have no water-works from the investment.”⁷⁴

Likewise, Jones’ partner, Dr. J. D. Nelson, was a crook while in Oklahoma.⁷⁵ Nelson lived in Oklahoma three years. He persuaded eight men to put up one thousand dollars apiece to purchase a site for a hospital in the black town of Boley. The state of Oklahoma accepted the gift and supported the building of the hospital. “We left the details to be worked out by Dr. Nelson and the state health officials. When we awoke, we had an entirely different proposition to the one which had been originally planned for, (a T. B. Sanitarium) [sic] of which Dr. Nelson was the president. When it had been running about two years and a half, the authorities put Dr. J. D. Nelson in jail for misapplying state funds.”⁷⁶ Much like the situation in Tuskegee with Jones and Dr. Ward, when Nelson got out of jail he and Jones schemed against the new president of the hospital “creating an awful mess. The state authorities of Oklahoma closed the Sanitarium, wrecked and moved the building, and just about this time, these two mountebanks pulled out of here and soon we heard of them at Tuskegee.”⁷⁷ The train ride from Oklahoma to Alabama was not expensive.

⁷⁴ Ibid.,12. NAACP.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1-14. See also “Jones Interviews Gov. Robinson,” *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma) 5 January 1922. “Dedicates Tubercular Hospital: Robinson Strikes at Lynching in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Says He Will Exhaust Funds of State For Conviction,” *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 10 September 1920.

⁷⁶ Chisum, “(Confidential) the Faithful Narrative of an Investigation of the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital,” 12.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Chisum ended his fourteen-page report to the United States Veterans Bureau in Washington D.C. with the mention that -- the law offices of Perry Howard were legal advisors and sponsors -- for Jones. Chisum also included that he "had the conviction" that individuals within the Veterans Bureau knew of Jones and Nelson's work to discredit the Tuskegee Veterans Hospital.

Chisum gave the information he gathered to General Hines. Jones was suspended on October 12. Jones stood "discredited, dishonest, disgruntled and a disloyal agitator, whose effort has been and now is to destroy the group of faithful and honest people of our Race who are trying to reflect credit upon the Race by administering efficiency [sic] the affairs of the three million dollar hospital."⁷⁸

Chisum's reputation flourished. They remembered when he saved poor blacks in Oklahoma:

[We are] like the segment when leaving Oklahoma black papers applauded Chisum. We are forced to say that this famous newspaper correspondent is some detective. It cannot possibly remain healthy for certain individuals about that institution under the galling fire from Chisum's pen. We are all watching the fur fly at long range.⁷⁹

Holsey congratulated Chisum personally with the words "It has been a great victory for the race and I congratulate you upon the splendid part that you played in its success."⁸⁰ Melvin Chisum's position was more than spy and provocateur in the

⁷⁸ Chisum., 13-14. Jones Will Not Quit Tuskegee, *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 13 March 1926. *Austin Texas Mouthpiece*, (Austin), 27 March 1926.

⁷⁹ *Austin Texas Statesman*, (Austin), 27 March 1926.

⁸⁰ Albon Holsey to Melvin Chisum 14 April 1926, Morton Papers.

mid 1920s. Because of his independence, his background in the black world from his youth to the period of working for Tuskegee Veterans Hospital, no one title can be used to define him. During this period though he moved from covert work to allowing his cloak to be removed. Was it intentional in order to gain a position within the Republican Party? Did the kingmaker, or a walking representative seek a legitimate job? Was that the reason he allowed previously covered up work to come to the forefront? Or with his race work in the 1920s did others uncover him? In 1926 William Dabney published the book *Chisum's Pilgrimage*, giving details about Chisum's prior life. Cincinnati's Colored Citizens told the story of Chisum as a labor agent in the late teens and during World War I. Something changed. Perhaps in a time when W. E. B. Du Bois and Walter White were "voices" Gamble recognized in her *Making a Place for Ourselves*, the country was also looking for other voices to lead blacks and Chisum was being lifted as one.⁸¹

Following his pilgrimage to look at basic issues that blacks dealt with from 1920s that resulted from white supremacy in the Republican Party helps to better illustrate how, during what has been called the Harlem Renaissance Era, blacks, beset with racist polemics, pulled themselves up "by their bootstraps" using whatever means they could acquire.⁸² This chapter shows how black politicians dealt with the pain of Republican political backlash by trying to use the Tuskegee Veterans hospital and how Chisum's uncouth position as spy and provocateur,

⁸¹ Gamble, *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement 1920 - 1945*, 98.

⁸² *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583-587. Cited as BTW Papers.

efficiency agent, and lobbyist interceded by using his government contacts.

Including Chisum's Race work, which he did for free for Tuskegee, shows how Chisum's background as a spy, beloved journalist, and his charismatic personality to develop friendships; they stopped interlopers who wanted to bring down Tuskegee Institute in order to build themselves up could "Come No Further" without being caught in his web of espionage.

Chapter VIII

CROSSING OVER AND TRIPPING UP; THE END OF ACCOMODATION

“The average Negro knows the white man better than the white man knows the Negro. Under the exacting conditions which the Negro had to live here with the white man has made him a diplomat of which any nation would be proud.”¹

--- Dr. Isaac William, *Young's Weekly Talks*

New Deal historians continue to miss one “very open secret” amid President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal administration and the black Democrats who forged ties with them in 1932. Indeed, because of the racism intrinsic in America and the economic crisis, the administration did not follow through by giving many appointments to blacks. Yet, hope flickered when, through patronage, Joseph Guffey, a senator from Pennsylvania, gave Robert Vann, editor of the *Pittsburg Courier*, one

¹ “Dr. Young’s Weekly Talks. Public Questions: Knowledge and Power,” *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 26 November 1920.

of “his” jobs as the assistant attorney general for Pennsylvania.² President Roosevelt then appointed Dr. William J. Thompkins, a physician and editor of the *Kansas City American*, as the recorder of deeds for Washington, D.C.³ However, according to Robert Vann, the 1932 election clandestinely inaugurated another black politician’s career, that of Melvin Jackson Chisum. In 1933, Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes appointed Chisum as the first and only black Public Works Administration (PWA) Investigator. Vann theorized that because “the powerful old-time Republican who turned Lincoln’s picture to the wall”⁴ for Democrat Roosevelt’s victory over Republican Herbert Hoover, Chisum became “the most powerful black man in America for a period.”⁵ The open secret included that Chisum achieved the privilege of handling patronage for the Democratic Party. The PWA officially hired Melvin Chisum in February 1934 as a special agent in the Washington D.C. area. This is the first chapter written into history that captures the account.

The development of Chisum’s life expands the work started by Nancy Weiss in *Farewell to The Party of Lincoln* (1983) on the political strategy of the “Big Four.”⁶

² Joseph Alsop and Robert Kintner, “The Guffey: Biography of a Boss New Style,” *Saturday Evening Post*, 26 March 1938, 6. Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburg Courier Politics and Black Journalism* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974).

³ Gary Kremer, “William J. Thompkins: African American Physician, Politician, and Publisher,” *Missouri Historical Review* 101 (2007).

⁴ *Los Angeles Eagle*, (Los Angeles), 10 November 1932.

⁵ National Personnel Records Center, National Archives, St. Louis Missouri; *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 28 July 1945; *The Union*, (Cincinnati), 4 March 1934. In his twenties Chisum became a spy and provocateur for Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee Machine. At sixty years of age, Chisum conducted “missions” as an efficiency agent and was a field agent for the National Negro Press Association.

⁶ Nancy Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of Fdr* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Recently discovered papers of Chisum's colleague and boyhood friend, Dr. Isaac William Young, specifically delineate how blacks accomplished the local, state and national network of support for the Roosevelt -Garner ticket. While historians of African Americans like Weiss attempted to elaborate the story, they lacked sources to complete story of the Big Four's work from local, state, and national government perspectives. Through using these new resources, this chapter brings information to the table that meets Weiss's criteria presented in her book and can add to her historical narrative. The history of Chisum's career at the PWA, gives insight into how the Roosevelt Administration used accommodation, to disrupt the call for civil rights on the part of Booker T. Washington's most aggressive lieutenants.

Chisum, a mostly self-made man, made changes throughout his life to meet the challenges of his time. He needed a Kingmaker in 1932. James Farley, one of Roosevelt's own kingmaker a key political advisor to Roosevelt when he was governor of New York became Chisum's kingmaker. As Democratic National Chairman of Roosevelt's presidential campaign in 1932, Farley earned the privilege of placing the Democratic Party spoils, or patronage positions, personally before President Roosevelt for his approval. His forte was his ability to consult with Roosevelt; when others could not get in to see the president, Farley could. Under James Farley, the old structure of patronage would come back to national politics through the Democratic Party. Farley "believed in the patronage system and

intended to follow it, something the GOP under Hoover never did for American blacks.”⁷

Chisum and Farley had known each other in the teens when Chisum was an efficiency agent at the United States Gypsum Company. They worked for a period together during the “Al Smith for President” campaign in 1928. Farley eventually moved over to the Roosevelt for Governor of New York campaign. Chisum respected Farley. He had a “rigid universal set of rules governing proper conduct and everyone understood them in the same way.”⁸ Farley “adhered to an unwritten but nevertheless rigid, code of political conduct constructed around the idea of party regularity, loyalty to one’s colleagues, absolute honesty and the understanding that the party [loyalty] would be rewarded in due course, usually in the form of patronage.”⁹ The two men had other attributes in common. Both Chisum and Farley had insecurity complexes about their lack of education and its drawbacks among politicians and businessmen who had college degrees. Both were prolific writers. Both believed they had come through the school of hard knocks because they had worked hard for all they achieved. Neither wanted to be kings, but only the makers of kings. Dr. Isaac William Young, Chisum’s childhood friend in Oklahoma, wanted to be a king.

⁷ James Farley, *Behind the Ballots: The Personal History of a Politician* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 224.

⁸ Daniel Scroop, *Mr. Democrat: Jim Farley, the New Deal and the Making of Modern American Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 23.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

Through political intrigue Young's and Chisum's story remained intertwined from boyhood to Young's death in 1937. A sketch of their boyhood in chapter one showed their earliest years. A mission for Booker T. Washington in chapter four showed their work together in Oklahoma. This chapter sketches their adult years as leaders in the nation. Young's stepfather, Joseph Brown, a Democrat was appointed to his first term as magistrate over the third ward of Louisiana in 1881. Located in St. Mary's Parrish, the area included the Franklin and the Saint Joseph districts. Under the Democratic Party's "lily white" policy, blacks gradually lost ground and were subjected to increased segregation and loss of political influence.¹⁰ Even though his stepfather lost his position because of lily-white politics a yearning for the political life and its nature churned in Young. In 1908 Young followed other Bookerites to Oklahoma. He left Louisiana a Democrat but changed into a Republican as he crossed the Oklahoma border. Young achieved political aspirations in the "all black" community of Boley, Oklahoma. He was voted mayor from 1912-1915. In 1914, he introduced Chisum to the area as a boyhood friend and journalist. In 1915 Washington died, Chisum was run out of Oklahoma and Young moved to Oklahoma City.

In 1915 Chisum, as president of the National Negro Press Association (NNPA), politician and reformer, changed the black power structure in Oklahoma. Through Oklahoma City's black newspaper, the *Oklahoma Tribune*, Chisum orchestrated the firing of Oklahoma Colored Agriculture and Normal University

¹⁰ Maurice Thompson, *The Story of Louisiana* (Boston: D Lithrop Company, 1888), 264.

(Langston) president, Inman Page. In the aftermath, there was no black state leader. Roscoe Dunjee took over the newspaper naming it the *Black Dispatch*. Dunjee and Young opposed each other for black leadership in Oklahoma City. Young pulled out in front of Dunjee in 1919 when under the table, he helped John “Jack” Walton, the white grassroots leader, gain election as mayor. Together the candidate for the grass roots whites and Young, representing the poorer blacks, laid a plan to economically stabilize both groups. The white mayoral candidate needed the black vote to win the election. The game was played against the Jim Crow mentality of the people. Who would believe Ku Klux Klansman John “Jack” Walton would forge a political relationship with Young? It was a myth of disharmony that allowed them to work together. No way, it was believed, could whites and blacks work together. Young operated under the constraints of his day, yet forged an alliance with Walton, knowing Walton was an overt racist and segregationist. Walton wanted to help poor whites and wanted the political position of mayor. This forged relationship between them made it possible for Walton to win the election. Though Young was “a leading Republican” he registered poorer black voters as Democrats with the help of Sammy Simpson, an ex-drug dealer, in Oklahoma City. During the period, one had to register as a Democrat in order to vote the Democratic ticket.¹¹

Walton won the election. Young was appointed chairman of the Negro Welfare League. As with most segregated ventures, the league had a white chair and black chair. The position made Young seem the “black mayor” of Oklahoma City. He was in charge of porters, railroad workers, and hotel bellhops and in contact with

¹¹ Brooks, “Oklahoma’s First Black Governor,” 49.

union workers as well as many of the destitute blacks of the streets. Young craved more political power and eventually got it. Walton ran for Governor in 1921. In 1921 Young became a Democrat and successfully used their platform to deliver the vote for Walton as Governor in 1922. Young moved away from the party of Lincoln. He was hailed as the leader of the “Negro Democrats” and a pioneer black Democrat of the nation.

Young assumed the role. He said to a group of black Democrats gathered to honor him: “It is going to be my responsibility to ask for the things that the Negro in Oklahoma needs during the next four years and by the eternal God I am going to be found asking for that which is necessary and the things that we ought to have.”¹² He asked for the patronage position to be president of Langston University. Young got it. Walton was impeached six months later. In 1928-1929 Dunjee overthrew Young’s reign as black Democratic leader in Oklahoma. During the period between 1928 and 1931 Young continued his ears, eyes, nose and throat medical practice, established a drug store and a cab service.¹³ Dunjee’s power as a politician grew because of the power of the black press.

The history within the black press remains crucial to understanding United States history. This dissertation defines the black press as newspapers published by and for American blacks. Since the information within the black press is used mostly as an alternative history its resources remain less regarded in the larger narrative. From Garland Penn’s first study of the black press, *The Afro American Press and Its*

¹² *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), 16 November 1922.

¹³ Brooks, “Oklahoma’s First Black Governor”, 39.

Editors (1969) to Patrick Washburn's, *The African American Newspaper* (2006)

books argue the black press housed the basis of the struggle for black freedom and the press as source of black political power. Leaning heavily on documentation from the black press and primary sources that reinforce them, remains the only way to reinsert the characters that remain of part of the what seems the border narrative in American black history now- but was the master narrative in their time period - back into the national history in to represent the story of the campaigns of American Blacks and their struggles in the 1920s and 1930s political spheres.

Chisum Versus President Hoover

When Chisum attempted to mimic Young's political maneuver on the national level by supporting a racist his quest backfired. In 1929 Chisum also suffered a major political setback like Young had in 1928-1929 in Oklahoma. Chisum backed George Pullman's son-in-law Governor Frank Lowden, in the Republican Nominating Convention for the presidency in 1928. When Hoover won the nomination and the election Chisum continued to support the Republican Party. In Hoover's first term as President he remained silent on matters of the black patronage in the country. "His inaugural address contained no specific references to racial matters and during his administration he made fewer public statements on racial issues than any other president in the twentieth century."¹⁴ Chisum spoke up

¹⁴ Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 233. Lary Grothaus, "Harry Hoover

for Hoover in black newspapers and at meetings. Black people were Chisum's constituency. But Chisum who had been in the background much of his life forgot his fern seed, a Shakespearean talisman, for invisibility. So, by the end of March when the President had made no reference to his plan for blacks Chisum published for the black public an expose interview in the *Pittsburg Courier*. Vann ran the headline "Melvin Chisum Gives Low Down on Political Future," referencing Hoover. Chisum had not met with Hoover but attended a meeting with Robert Russa Moton, principal of Tuskegee, when he met with the President. In an interview Chisum said that "President Hoover understands more about the colored people than the quasi Washington leaders thinks he does . . ." ¹⁵ Unlike the prophesy in the Tuskegee Hospital scandal Chisum was off the mark and could not fix the error. The information got back to Hoover.

Varying discussions continue about Hoover's response to black constituents. In *Hoover Blacks and Lilly Whites* (1985) Donald Lisio developed Hoover's character as paternal. Reading Lisio's character development of Hoover makes one believe that he had a deeply felt compassion for blacks. However, Lisio believes that Hoover had to conceal that disposition. Other authors, particularly those of the time period, including George Padmore in *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (1931), Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians* (1935), Ethan Michaili, *Horace Liveright, *The Washington Merry-Go-Round* (1931) and the newspaper the *Afro American*, revealed that Hoover

and Black Americans," in *Herbert Hoover and the Republican Era: A Reconsideration*, ed. Carl Krog (New York: University Press America, 1984), 132.

¹⁵ Melvin Chisum, Melvin Chisum Gives "Low Down" On Political Future, *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 30 March 1929.

was a blatant racist. Hoover intentionally enslaved people of African, Chinese, and Italian descent for economic gain.¹⁶ In *Negro Politicians* Gosnell noted that Hoover believed he did not need the black vote. He believed that the South “should be carried by white leadership. Hoover’s own bigotry tainted the great victory and the four years he remained in office.”¹⁷ Yet, according to Lisio the bigotry was imbedded in Hoover’s campaign, not the man. Lisio wrote that black politicians began accusing him [Hoover] of being anti-black and pursuing a lily white strategy: even before Hoover had in fact decided upon any political presidential policy toward the South or blacks.”¹⁸ The black people, press and press associations stood waiting for some leadership. Chisum took the plunge as a leading Republican with supposed access to Hoover.

So, Chisum gave an explanation for Hoover’s lack of response to blacks that ran in papers around the country. He prophesized that in Hoover’s first term that “Mr. Hoover is going to recognize the service of the colored people in a fine way but he is not going to tolerate an orgy of irresponsible [sic] folks at the white house every day before breakfast.”¹⁹ Both presidents Harding and Coolidge held Chisum in high esteem. However, Hoover saw Chisum a just another black journalist who

¹⁶ George Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (London: R.I.L.U. Magazine of International Trade Union Committee Of Negro Unions, 1931). Entire book. Harold Gosnell, *Negro Politicians* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1935). 21-36; Horace Liveright, *Washington Merry-Go-Round*, (New York: Jorace Liveright, Inc., 1931), 31-34. *Afro American*, (Washington), 22 October 1932. Liveright is the publisher.

¹⁷ Gosnell, *Negro Politicians*, 30. Grothaus, *Harry Hoover and Black Americans*, 132.

¹⁸ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily Whites*, 93.

¹⁹ Melvin Chisum, Melvin Chisum Gives “Low Down” On Political Future, *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 30 March 1929.

needed to know his place. In August of 1929, Chisum was granted an interview with President Hoover.

When Chisum met with the president, instead of praise from the administration, Hoover repudiated him and reminded him of his place as a Negro. The only source of this information is in the black press. The original information stems from the August 10, 1929 article ***“White House Will No Longer be Publicity Seekers” springboard to Headlines***, Vann declared outright in the caption that he ***“BELIEVED CHISUM’S VISIT PRECIPITATED ULTIMATUM.”*** After personally presenting a letter from a Robert Russa Moton to Hoover, a conversation ensued. Chisum emerged from the Oval Office, was rejected for publishing his sentiments as a leading black Republican that Hoover felt that he had no right to express. According to the *Pittsburg Courier* it was because of Chisum that the President gave the ultimatum and closed ranks on all black reporters. His office would not be a “springboard to headlines.”²⁰ It seems Chisum lost access to the press both black and white after August 29, 1930. It seems as if he was blacklisted. Not even pictures of him appear in the black press. There are no articles with his name until his appearance in the *Baltimore African American* in November 7th of 1931. His name seemed to be “Negro,” as Booker T. Washington once labeled him in the early 1900s when he was nothing to BTW but a spy (chapter 4).

In 1931 Melvin Chisum journalist appeared once more in the black press. In November of 1931 Chisum started a newspaper column “Ivory and Gold” in the *Afro*

²⁰ *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 10 August 1929.

American Baltimore newspaper. Ivory and gold are two of the most precious commodities from Africa. His next article appeared December 19, 1931, in a *New York Age* editorial response to J. R. Hawkins, a black Republican leader who supported Hoover. Chisum started by ridiculing Hawkins as a black leader for defending the Hoover administration “which has treated the Negro with contempt.” Hawkins reported that the Republican Government employed 54,000 soldiers, charwomen, messengers, and unskilled laborers making the outlay of the government to blacks at \$69,000,000 a year.

Chisum’s article developed into a scathing report on the Republican Party and its treatment of its black constituency. Chisum responded that the amount was paltry and insignificant in comparison to what other races had procured. Then he ridiculed blacks who wanted “recognition in the service of the nation but not at the price of liberty, which politicians easily barter away.” Blacks wanted “recognition of their rights as citizens of the republic.” Chisum wrote, “Let us follow a square deal for all people . . . We can never become a factor in politics as long as our ballot is a plaything which may be parked and found on almost any election day.”²¹ This article written eloquently yet with powerful innuendos would mark Chisum’s final separation from the Republican Party in the coming election. It also reveals Chisum’s own hypocrisy, because he had been a man who sold patronages and sought a position within political bureaucracy. As Chisum moved into gaining a political position his principles changed. There is here a question of integrity.

²¹ *New York Age* (New York), 19 December 1931.

While the ever-encroaching Depression and the stock market crash weighed heavily in his disfavor, historians note that Hoover's lack of a positive image to blacks and his belief he did not need the black vote also contributed to his downfall. By the end of September 1932, Hoover's reelection committee comprehended that he needed a black following if he wanted to win the presidency a second time. When Raymond Benjamin, head of the Republican Nominating Committee (RNC colored) queried black Republicans three months before the election, within the party lines, he found several points against Hoover and his administration over and above black complaints of economic inequality. First, Hoover had not made any outstanding appointments among blacks. Secondly, Hoover refused to have his picture taken with blacks. Finally, blacks felt that Hoover was against them. Immediately, his planning committee readjusted their work to meet the threats of the election. They added appointments of blacks to the RNC for colored voters. Black politicians, Roscoe Simmons, John Hawkins, L.K. William, C. R. Richardson, Perry Howard and the only elected black congressman in the United States, Oscar De Priest, were given a stipend of \$350 a month not to exceed \$10 a day to deliver the black vote. In another gesture of despair, within a week a picture of the RNC leaders (colored) took a picture with Hoover at a nominating committee meeting.

Closely watching the Republicans shuffle around Washington as attempted to gain black support after four years of neglect, Kelly Miller, professor at Howard University, author, and reformer wrote in the *Afro American* newspaper that "You cannot wipe out four years of complaining and criticism for Mr. Hoover and his lily-

white program by an eleventh hour change of heart.”²² His statement was prophetic. In *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, Weiss argued that blacks became Democrats in response to economic benefits, while Sitkoff in *A New Deal For Blacks* argued that blacks joined the Democratic Party because the New Deal moved to embrace civil rights.²³ In the simplest terms, following Chisum and Young’s political work blacks moved to the Democratic Party because black leadership attended to their churches, fraternal organizations, and cultivated their grassroots communities. Once there the leaders told them when, where, what to read, and how to vote.²⁴ While white papers mostly ignored black people the black press gave them stories from newspapers that brought facts home they could get nowhere else. Adding to this thrush is professor of African American Studies at University of Illinois at Chicago, Jane Rhodes, description of the black press in the United States. She believes that the black newspapers became the tangible symbol of freedom.²⁵ The newspaper was something blacks could see, feel, and hold together. They hanged newspapers on the walls like pictures of black heroes. Hoovercrats had a battle against the black press and against the black memory.

²² *Afro American* (Baltimore), 22 October 1932.

²³ Weiss; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

²⁴ Even in the 1960s and 1970s in churches in Virginia blacks were simply given a voting card that was used at the precinct. Communities trusted the preacher’s choices.

²⁵ Jane Rhodes, Mary Ann Shad Cary: *The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century*. (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1998), xvi, 32, 63, 184. Jane Rhodes, “Black Press Soldiers Without Swords,” Film by Stanley Nelson (California Newsreel, 1999).

The black press played a dual role during the election. It served as an outlet of information and as vehicle of change. In the campaign against Hoover the press was the only vehicle to reveal the background of the candidates to literate blacks who took information to the masses to vote. These leaders were tied to churches, fraternal organizations; and they handed out voter cards for their followers to take to the polls. The RNC had a lot to do to make up for Hoover's lifetime of avid discrimination against minorities. In the early 1930s as in the fight in Oklahoma in the teens - in addition to the black church or speakers moving around the town - the black press was an effective means in developing public opinion. "When the press speaks the people listen, the white politicians of both parties if they are wise will take heed," Kelly Miller warned.²⁶

According to Kelly, by October 1932 most black Newspapers stopped accepting "the pittance" from the Republican Party and opened the papers up to both parties for paid advertisements at fixed rates. The black press became non-partisan in selling advertising and democratic in support of the president. From Roscoe Dunjee's *Black Dispatch* in Oklahoma, to the black presses around the nation, black newspapers turned their influence to Roosevelt and away from Hoover. Kelly's take was this. The *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, the *Louisville News*, the *Houston Informer* and the *Kansas City Call* were anti Hoover. In the *Chicago Defender* Kelly said that was hesitant "lingering, shivering on the brink and fears to launch away." While the *Afro-American* and *Pittsburg Courier* were pro Roosevelt, *New York Age* refused to support Hoover. The *Washington Tribune*, the *Indianapolis Recorder*, the

²⁶ *Afro American*, (Baltimore), 22 October 1932.

Boston Chronicle and the *Boston Guardian* were the only black papers in New England cut the cord, the *Amsterdam News* and the *Philadelphia Tribune* stand with Republicans “feebly and apologetically” with Republicans. Not only black newspapers but also Adolph Ochs *New York Times* and William Randolph Hearst’s news agencies lent editorial opposition to another Hoover presidency.²⁷

According to research by Jane Rhodes, the black press remained different from the mainstream press. It was not governed by “ideals of objectivity.” The Republican Party and Hoover’s personal disrespect and disregard for blacks resulted in a backlash from the press that rivals the modern media’s coverage of presidents. Weiss explained that the Republican Party’s lack of support for blacks opened the door for Democrats to court the black vote.²⁸

Hoovercrats not only battled Democrats for the black vote but for the minds of voting blacks because of Black Civil Religion. Newspapers published vivid stories against the Republican leader. The *Crusader News Service* (New York, 1932-1940) was run by a cadre of names Shawn Alexander called the “Army Of Lions” (chapter 5.)²⁹ Benjamin Davis, Loren Miller, William Patterson, Cyril Briggs all of whom worked in Oklahoma with Chisum in the teens, unearthed and reported Pan American information that was of interest to blacks. Chisum appeared again at the

²⁷ Kelly Miller, *Afro-American* (Washington), 22 October 1932. Richard Sherman, *The Republican Party and Black America: From Mckinley to Hoover 1896 to 1933* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973). 232. Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan*, 30.

²⁸ Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, 6. Jane Rhodes, “Black Press Soldiers Without Swords,” Film by Stanley Nelson (California Newsreel, 1999).

²⁹ Shawn Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle before the Naacp* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 2012).

Afro American newspapers during 1931. Using the front page of the *Afro American* newspaper and in bold print, the coverage seemed an important “alert” to readers who saw it. Hoover’s past was not covered in the mainline media but black reporters spilled it into the black community. The information was not subjective but based on facts; the *Washington Merry Go Round* (1931) suggested the evidence was afternoon tea talk among the politicians in Washington D.C.:

Today, the president of the United States. . . Between the two periods, a long consistent record of Jim-Crow, anti-Negro policies: That is the story of Herbert Hoover, candidate of the Republican Party for re-election to the presidency. . . Hoover, the mine manager, “found it cheaper to pay \$15 whenever Chinese laborers were killed than to properly timber the mine,” says Walter Liggett in his book, “The Rise of Herbert Hoover.” . . . Not only did Hoover’s Company profit through exploiting the labor of coolies, but he also invested in the shipping company which conducted slave traffic between China and South Africa.³⁰

For a generation who survived slavery, Reconstruction and Jim Crow the stories helped transform Republicans into Democrats and non-voters into voters.

The following week more stories about Hoover developed enmity between the Republican Party and its black constituency, people who voted Republican because of its link of the party to Lincoln. Black newspapers covered Pan African news on a regular basis. According to the *Afro American* newspaper articles, Hoover forced Liberia to accept a loan made by Firestone’s own company, the Finance Corporation of America, at 7% interest. The loan’s clause limited Liberia, as blacks

³⁰ Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, 93-105. Horace Liveright, *Washington Merry-Go-Round* (New York: Jorace Liveright Inc, 1931). 55. *Afro American* (Baltimore), 16 October 1932. Lewis, 2. 243.

in America were limited. The country of Liberia could make no loans elsewhere for 20 years even though they could borrow at a lesser interest. "Liberia, originally founded as a haven for Negroes escaping from slavery, was once again transformed into a country of forced labor and slavery." The statement was a touchstone for so many ex-slaves still alive in the United States. "Money was paid to the chiefs of native tribes, who in turn forced workers to work for the Firestone Company. Hoover was rewarded in 1928 when, Firestone contributed \$25,000 to the Republican campaign. Subsequently, Firestone got a tax refund of \$3,000,000."³¹ According to government papers unclassified in 1991, Firestone moved into Liberia in 1926, and by working with warlords established its business. No rebuttal came from within the Hoover or Firestone camps. Except for Padmore's, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers* (1931) and the black press the first reports on the ordeal are in the mid-teens of the twenty-first century.³² The reports have been recently printed online and in blogs. The black press attacks against Hoover were contemporary to the time period. The attacks on the people in Liberia by Firestone warlords were attacks on relatives of American Blacks whose family members had gone to Liberia after slavery and others who left for Liberia in the early 1920s.

³¹ *Afro-American* (Baltimore), 16 October 1932.

³² John Harper, "Firestone's and the Warlord: What you need to know about Frontlines documentary on Firestone in the Liberian Civil War," Akron Community blog, Cleveland.com, 19 November 2014, www.cleveland.com/akron/index.ssf/.../firestone_and_the_warlord_what.html. For "Firestone and Liberia: A Secret History Unearthed" is a Propublica report that has copies of original documents that were unclassified in 1991. Steve Engelberg, Robin Fields, "Firestone and Liberia: A Secret History Unearthed," ProPublica, inc, www.ProPublica.org/article/firestone-and-the-war-Lords-editors-note. Padmore, *The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers*, 70.

Farley's Check Mate: The Big Four

An election is the time when kings are made and kingmakers tested. Knowing the existence of race and class prejudice among Americans, Franklin Roosevelt's team for a New Deal administration sought the black vote for the 1932 election. Getting black support for the blatantly racist, mostly Southern, Democratic Party was challenging. In 1928 the first black and only black congressman was elected to Congress in the twentieth century -- Chisum's nemesis, the Republican Oscar Stanton De Priest from the state of Illinois. De Priest was formidable as the champion of all blacks because he was the only black man in congress. Republicans ultimately used De Priest to recruit black votes in the final countdown to the 1932 election. Democrats needed American black champions and advocates such as De Priest but they had no elected officeholders because of their long held stance of lily-white.

Farley's strategy not only encouraged the disgruntled black leaders in the Republican Party to join the Democratic Party, he also arranged to obtain black men who could bring something to the table, men from the National Negro Press Association (NNPA) and those who were attached to political machines. Democrats pursued men such as Robert Vann, owner of the *Pittsburg Courier*, and kept in contact with Dr. William J. Thompkins, a Democrat affiliated with the "Boss Tom" Pendergast machine in Kansas City and owner/editor of the *Kansas City American*. Farley also supported Dr. Isaac W. Young, the "Father of Black Democracy" in Oklahoma, who was ousted from his leadership of the black Democrats in Oklahoma.

With one letter to the black leaders Farley reinstated Young. After watching Chisum go back and forth, unwilling to repudiate Republicanism but finally relinquish his ties to the Republican Party and declare himself anti-Hoover, Farley recruited Melvin Chisum, as his special weapon or fixer in September of 1932.

Farley determined to take advantage of Republican oversights. He developed a network of active Democratic workers throughout the country. Until the 1930 elections Democrats had participated in a Negro Bureau in order to get votes from blacks. Farley changed the system by dividing the country into four districts, in each of which the state black caucuses competed to be the best in their region. It was called the "Big Four." Few documents remain from a state and local perspective of the black organization that competed to be in the big four. However, medical doctors (1884-1944) of Kansas and I. W. Young of Oklahoma left records that show how they campaigned to reach their goals.

Oklahoma had one of the two best-organized Negro Democratic Clubs in the United States. In the early 1920s blacks in Oklahoma and Kansas faced great risk when they both switched political party's loyalties. With the aid of the Pendergast Machine in Kansas City, Dr. William Thompkins was first to organize American black Democrats on a state level. The Pendergast Machine dominated politics in Kansas from 1900 to 1939. Thompkins and Young attended ear, eye, and throat school together. They both made their rise by backing white politicians. However, because the influence of the Pendergast Machine in Kansas, the state had almost a 100%

turnout in elections for whomever James Pendergast chose. Many elections thus were fixed to keep Pendergast's Democratic constituents in office.

Young's career in politics was much harder than Thompkins. Young fought hard for everything he gained in Oklahoma. In the 1930s Young's greatest vexation was that he had no Democratic newspaper to back him. In order to be competitive with other black organizations in the region, he needed to transform his state organization into one of the Big Four in the National Democratic Convention in 1932. Roscoe Dunjee used the *Black Dispatch* to slay Young at every turn in response to Chisum's *Tribune* newspaper against Inman Page in 1915.³³ Thompkins attempted to usurp Young's authority and temper down Young's Democratic organization's powerful upsurge by placing Bud Brown, connected to the *Tulsa Eagle* newspaper, over Oklahoma Democrats. Thompkins and Brown insinuated that they were opening national headquarters in Tulsa to keep Young out of the national limelight.³⁴

However, knowing Young could garner the black vote in Oklahoma, Farley with only one letter to Oklahoma Democratic leaders in 1931, put Young back into the position as leader of Oklahoma. Young's first move was to find an editor and establish a newspaper. The Democratic Club then attempted to buy the *Tulsa Eagle*. Following the 1921 riots, Tulsa was still a landmine for politics. Attacked during the riot in Tulsa and escaping though badly beaten, A. J. Smitherman, former editor of the *Tulsa Star*, refused to return to Oklahoma from Buffalo, New York, to help

³³ See Franklin, *My Life and Era: The Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin*, 53.

³⁴ *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), 27 September 1928.

Young.³⁵ C. G. Lowe of the *Muskogee Lantern* came in to help “whip the other would-be Democratic leaders from other states.”³⁶ The fighting for the privilege of being in the Big Four was intense. Lowe wrote to Young:

You will recall the democratic leader of Mo. . . . [He] had everything his way at the state meeting. He is from K.C. We must get ahead of that bunch. They use much space in the *K.C. American*, Thompkins paper, telling of the great work they are doing. The St. Louis bunch is not following. If we get in with the eastern bunch, who are not anxious as to who leads in the West we can get assistance from them. . . . Thompkins will have *The Call*, *The Argus*, and *the St. Louis American* and another small paper from Hannibal to fight.³⁷

The Democratic National Convention sent no money to Young for the campaign. He financed most of the black Oklahoma work from his own coffers. Before the national convention in 1932, Young’s group needed five thousand dollars to buy the *Eagle* to compete with Thompkins as number one black Democratic club in the southwest. It was a hard sell in the depression economy and the effort failed. With the Pendergast Machine behind him, Thompkins pulled out ahead of Young. Dr. F. O. Williston, James Howard, A. W. Scott and I.W. Young, Oklahoma, A.H. Underdown, George Taylor, J.H. Canton, Leary Perry, SH. Rose Dr. H.M. Gray and J. Lewis Taylor formed the National Democratic Negro Voter’s League in headquartered in Washington D. C. They invited Chisum to join their ranks. He declined and suggested they add Thomas Smith of Baltimore to their list. Chisum remained an independent – a fixer. Though his group was powerful, Young was no

³⁵ A. J. Smitherman to I. W. Young, 29 March 1932, OKCU.

³⁶ C. G. Lowe to I. W. Young, 11 April 1932, OKCU.

³⁷ Ibid.

match in caucuses whose leaders were newspaper editors and had the backing of powerful machine bosses. Young came in second to Thompkins in his region.

Earlier, at the Democratic National Convention Farley announced that there would be no national Negro Bureau with one leader. Instead, he had created four regional black Democratic caucuses from the many who competed —the Big Four: the National Colored Democratic Association, National Democratic Voters League, Tammany Hall Negroes, and Julian Rainey of Boston, seemingly a one-man show.³⁸ The convention appointed Robert Vann of Pittsburg to supervise Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Thompkins took over Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska. Boston attorney Julian Rainey would oversee New England, and Dr. Joseph Johnson of Columbus, Ohio, would have charge of Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Tammany Hall would run the New York area. Endorsed by Tammany Hall leader John Curry, Lester Walton was appointed political strategist.

The original design was that they all competed for recognition from the Democratic National Convention for their work at the state level. At the Democratic National Convention, the best four groups of Negroes were designated to handle the Negro campaign for the National Democratic Committee. When Democrats won the election, it was up to the Big Four leaders to recommend patronage appointments in local, state, and national arenas. Each head of the Big Four was supposed to receive a

³⁸ *Black Dispatch* (Oklahoma City), 29 September 1932; Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), 44. Weiss found it important to state that Thompkins was one of the Big Four and the only black to receive an appointment; she was incorrect. N. Scott, Jr., to I. W. Young, 16 September 1933, OKCU. *The Union*, (Cincinnati), 24 November 1932; Associated Negro Press, 2 February 1932, OKCU.

patronage position from the president. "Not only is it expected that the five will receive outstanding appointments and have the ear of the Democratic Party leaders, but it is thought they will have much to do with Negro policy."³⁹ Although Young's state was originally under Thompkins something must have happened (perhaps it was their rivalry in Tulsa) because he did not serve under Thompkins but instead went with Dr. Johnson of Ohio.⁴⁰ Young served as chairman of the Campaign Committee of the National Democratic Negro Voters League, Inc., instead of under Thompkins.

After the National Democratic Convention, political strategists moved in frenzy. Melvin Chisum played both sides he started making headway with James Farley. While at the same time he attempted to keep ties with the Republicans. However, every move Chisum made seemed to be news worthy. When Chisum insinuated a deal with Democrats it was front-page news. It was a "sign of the times," the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* reported. "Melvin Chisum told last week why he was giving up his life-long allegiance to the Republican Party. . . . Mr. Chisum wields considerable influence and has the confidence of many white and colored citizens. As a publicist and journalist, he has standing and useful contacts and outlets for his opinions."⁴¹ When the *Journal and Guide* reported the story, Chisum had not informed the Republicans of his considering a change. Actually, he was still vying for a top black leadership position within the Republican Party.

³⁹ *The Union* (Cincinnati), 24 November 1932.

⁴⁰ *Tulsa Eagle* (Tulsa), 12 June 1937. Campaign notes and letters are in the OKCU.

⁴¹ "The Ides of November," *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (Norfolk), 16 July 1932.

The Republicans sabotaged him. When he went to see if he could get a better deal or position within the national Republican Party than the offer from the Democrats he walked into a trap. The black press followed Chisum closely. Perhaps because of his run in with Hoover earlier, the black Republicans followed his endeavors even closer. Editors had a tendency not to forget past articles or letters to the editor. Chisum's hypocrisy in political loyalty slapped him in his face. His article against Hoover, J. R. Hawkins, and the Republican Party that had been written December 1931 in the *New York Age*, after he came out of his year long sojourn in 1929, was as vivid to Republican blacks in August of 1932 as it had been in December of 1931. After several scathing articles against Republicans Chisum's column "Ivory and Gold" in the *Afro American* black newspapers described his transition from Republican to altruist to Democrat. While calling on President Herbert Hoover's intimate friend from California and in charge of the Colored Voters Division (CVD), Raymond Benjamin, instead of a personal visit, Chisum found Republican Congressman Oscar De Priest and Colonel Roscoe Simmons waiting in Benjamin's office. Thinking he would have a private conversation with Benjamin he wound up being interrogated by De Priest and Benjamin about his political status. When Benjamin asked Chisum if he was a Democrat Chisum replied, "I'm not a Democrat. I'm an altruist working for the good of my people."⁴² Republicans had not wanted his help in 1929 when Hoover repudiated him. They still ostracized him in

⁴² Melvin Chisum, "Ivory and Gold" *Afro American* (Baltimore), 6 August 1932.

1932. He stood no chance with Benjamin who Reinzi Leimus called “the White House Ringmaster for Hoover’s Negro Side Show.”⁴³

Chisum was not a politician but a walking delegate. During this period he wanted to move from his invisible position to a political position. However, he continued to get trapped in the political espionage that he had witnessed from the outside. Perhaps after the removal of Perry Howard from the administration, Chisum thought he would fit in. However, if Hoover removed a prestigious black from office to please his white southern constituency, Chisum’s removal from the press and possibly the halls of Congress in 1929 would have been the first dismissal. Whatever the reason, Chisum could not get into the good graces of Republicans under the Hoover Administration. Much of the problem involved situations he created.

Leimus, a writer for the *New York Age*, used the same tactics on Chisum that Bruce Grit applied thirty-three years prior when Bruce charged that Chisum had falsely managed an actor. Leimus printed a sting that being an “altruist” in politics of that period was a cop out. The term’s meaning - a person unselfishly concerned or devoted to the welfare of others - was not necessarily coined by Chisum but used in the context to escape choosing a party. “The term was coined by the veteran raceologist, Melvin J. Chisum. . . After Oscar and Roscoe had thrown the anti-Hoover articles from the *Chicago Defender* and other papers, into Chisum’s teeth and accused him of being a Democrat.” Leimus reported that Chisum announced in the

⁴³ Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks and Lily Whites*, 271.

Norfolk Journal and Guide that he had quit the Republican Party and repudiated President Hoover.⁴⁴ The nephew of Booker T. Washington, John Washington and son of Oscar De Priest, Stanton De Priest, were appointed to the Republican National Committee. His own articles placed him outside Hoover for President campaign.

When assured he could not gain a place in the Republican CVD, Chisum replied to questions of his political stance on September 2, 1932 in his “Ivory and Gold” column, “ANY ROOSEVELT IS BETTER FOR PRESIDENT THAN A FAITHLESS HOOVER. I am not a Democrat; I am a disgusted Republican, but it is based on principle. The illustrious and courageous history of the Republican party [sic] - the party of Lincoln, Grant, Garfield, McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt – is shamed by the lily white attitude of Herbert Hoover and his cohorts.” Chisum criticized Hoover because he had not attempted to be politically fair with blacks but “humiliated and insulted all of us, in no uncertain terms Hoover wants the Republican Party to be a white man’s party.” Chisum wrote in his column that Perry Howard De Priest and Roscoe Simmons and the “sun-tanned” politicians were despicable, not concerned about the welfare of the people but only concerned about “political pap (money) and jobs – any kind of jobs from messengers on down, ‘Yessir, Mr. Boss.’”⁴⁵

While Chisum fought for political passage in the coming election, his brother W. Woodruff Chisum, who had continued the family real estate business in Long Island, New York and had been a veteran “Hellfighter” of the New York 15th

⁴⁴ Melvin Chisum and Rev. Wm. Byrd Seek Leadership of Republican Campaign for President Hoover, *New York Age* (New York), 20 August 1932. *The Negro Star* (Wichita), 7 August 1932.

⁴⁵ Melvin Chisum, “Ivory and Gold” *Afro American* (Baltimore), 3 September 1932

Regiment in World War I, landed a federal appointment on Ellis Island as Secretary of the Labor Dock. Emmett Scott, then secretary to the president at Howard University was appointed as a member to Washington D.C.'s newly formed parole board. Still very much carrying the ethos of the Tuskegee Machine in him like a sword, Scott warred with W.E.B. DuBois. Perhaps the American Black Civil religious tradition did not link Scott to DuBois because DuBois remained an agnostic to religious dogma and the election. DuBois did not have a religious tradition. He stayed away from church "because ministers had nothing to say."⁴⁶ Nor did he have anything to say about religion.

Somewhere between September 3rd 1932 and September 16th Chisum transitioned from Republican work to the Democratic Party. Even though he campaigned in the North, Chisum's first major rally was in Los Angeles, California backing vice presidential candidate John Garner, "Cactus Jack," from Chisum's home state of Texas. "Mr. Chisum told those present that this was the first time that he has ever worked in the interest of Democratic party but he is just as earnest this time as he ever was."⁴⁷ He was paid \$350 to travel to California. He admitted the reason for change was the negative treatment of Hoover towards his race. Melvin Chisum wrote that he was "in the business of exposing scheming grafters, highbinders, and moral reprobates."⁴⁸ From T. Thomas Fortune in 1899 to A. Philip Randolph in the late 1920s - in his boxing, journalism, and political careers, Melvin Chisum usually went to battle with prominent black foes he believed immoral or had political

⁴⁶ *Afro American* (Washington), 31 December 1932.

⁴⁷ *Argus* (St. Louis), 16 September 1932.

⁴⁸ Melvin Chisum, *Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 12 April 1924.

agendas. However, in his greatest battles against injustice in the black world he warred not against a black foe but against injustice in the United States, Liberia, and Haiti -- Herbert Hoover. Chisum made it clear he was "not fighting the Republicans, all his work is being done against the President and his gang."⁴⁹

Until 1932 Chisum had been as stalwart a Republican as Saint Paul was a Benjamite. Like so many American blacks, he was vested in the Republican Party as a child of a freed slave. Abraham Lincoln freed blacks. The Republican Party was the party of liberators. It had been that simple. Because of the belief that the Republican Party was somehow a part of the black American tradition in the past and it was supposed to be part of the tradition into the future, Chisum was relentless in his "Ivory and Gold" attack on republicans urging them to return to the original ethics of the "Party of Lincoln." One of Chisum's "Ivory and Gold" banners read, "Hoover Termed the Worst Enemy We Have Ever Had in the White House." Even he had to recognize that the Republicans' engrafting of Southerners in their ranks had changed the party. He wrote in his column, "Hoover has demonstrated in deeds and by word of mouth, that he is opposed to Negroes exercising any sort of authority and that he does not intend to allow them to control any political power where he can prevent it."⁵⁰ The next week Chisum wrote, "Finally, Mr. Hoover's public policies have worked to the double undoing of the Negro citizenry and we as citizens must rise up in November to help vote Mr. Hoover out of office."⁵¹ As he moved away from the Republican Party, Chisum promoted Roosevelt's rhetoric. He only wanted a

⁴⁹ Melvin Chisum, "Ivory and Gold" *Afro American* (Baltimore), 15 October 1932.

⁵⁰ "Ides of March," *Afro-American* (Baltimore), undated, Chisum Papers, OKCU.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

“new deal” from the Republican Party. He ended, referring to Lincoln, “The great Emancipator would not know his party if he were to see the leaders of today. Frederick Douglass would be unable to recognize this party if he were to meet it in heaven today.”⁵²

In late September of 1932, De Priest headed for the Midwest. His tour was from San Diego California to Seattle Washington then to Minneapolis Minnesota. He went on an “offensive block.” His job was to block the Democratic Party from taking the vote from black Republicans not only for the party but he fought for his own seat in Chicago as a state representative. The *Chicago Defender* newspaper followed his tour. De Priest always carried an ace up his sleeve because he knew about Governor Roosevelt’s disability. In Mexia Texas, Chisum’s birthplace, De Priest told black audiences that they were actually voting for Garner instead of Franklin Roosevelt. If anything happened to Roosevelt “Garner would bring to the presidency the attitude of the South toward the Negro.” He did not want to be “handicapped in my efforts for the American people.”⁵³ Headlines read “De Priest Says South Wants Garner in President Chair,” “De Priest Begins Speaking Tour to Aid Hoover,” “Southern Democrats Hate to Admit that Race Vote is Wanted.”⁵⁴ The *Pittsburg Courier* followed De Priest with honest reporting. Vann wrote that since his election De Priest represented “in a way the whole Negro race.” However, “after Mr. De Priest got out before the whole country, naturally he expounded advice to the who race.”

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Mexia Herald*, (Mexia), 23 September 1932.

⁵⁴ *Chicago Defender* (Chicago), 15 September 1932; *Chicago Defender* (Chicago), 24, September 1932; *Chicago Defender* (Chicago), 1 October 1932.

The problem for the paper revolved around De Priest representing all blacks but espousing a re-election of Hoover when his stance in congress was as a great “non-partisan leader.” Vann gives insight of the minds of blacks watching the campaign unfold. “Now, however, Mr. De Priest has deserted his own organization and gone over to Mr. Hoover, lock, stock, and barrel, ... leaving his Non-Partisan followers high and dry.”⁵⁵ Like Chisum, De Priest made decisions based on personal goals. Melvin Chisum Jr. wrote:

Dad used to tell me that he should have listened to me, regarding his relationship with Oscar De Priest. De Priest and he developed into antagonists, if not enemies. Dad told me that early in his relationship with De Priest, he brought Mr. De Priest to our home. I would imagine that this was during the short period we resided in D. C. – 1924 or 1925. I would have been two or 2 or 3 years old and had not developed any of the inhibitions or guile of older kids. Dad said that he brought me into the room where Mr. De Priest was and, and introduced me to “his friend, Mr. De Priest.” I burst out with the loud, wailing proclamation, “Don’t like friend. Don’t like Friend.” All of Dad’s efforts to mollify me were useless. I would have nothing to do with De Priest, much to Dad’s embarrassment. He says that if he had followed my lead in that relationship, it would have saved him a lot of grief. I never did understand why De Priest and Chisum fell out with one another, but politics being like it is, such developments are not surprising.⁵⁶

Chisum gave one last attempt in August of 1932 to work with the Republicans. The “Hoover managers,” knowing Chisum had the ability to bring in the black vote as “a man of much travel and contacts” denied him work in the national party.⁵⁷ It seems Chisum never regained ties to the leadership after the 1929

⁵⁵ *Pittsburg Courier*, (Pittsburg), 8 October 1932.

⁵⁶ Dr. Melvin Chisum to Author, 4 January 2007. OKCU.

⁵⁷ “Two Seek Leadership of Negro Republicans,” *New York Age* (New York), 20

incident. Whatever, the Democrats acquired his talent to wean voters away from DePriest, as in love or war, all was fair in politics. They immediately put him on the road knowing that less than thirty days earlier he had offered himself to the Republicans.

Chisum handled the election as he had handled the work of field agent for the NNPA. Instead of riding trains he got in his car and followed the trail of his Republican nemesis, Representative Oscar De Priest. Of course, Chisum and De Priest had a long history together. The only black man in the country who carried as much influence inside congress was the walking delegate for black race. His family in tow, Chisum supported the Democrats as he traveled around the country. In September of 1932, Chisum ostentatiously proved his point to both Republicans and Democrats. He left his position with Samuel Insull, his house in the white neighborhood of Glencoe residential neighborhood in Chicago, placed the family furniture in storage, and moved his family to a hotel in Chicago. From there, he drove across the country with his wife Anne and two children to California. Throughout his trip he stopped in cities across America espousing a “new deal” agenda for blacks and the black family.

Chisum gave the “low down” on his travel to California after the election. He stopped at the homes of once great black Republicans who became Democrats in 1932.⁵⁸ They drove 2696 miles without a problem. Oklahoma was of great importance in the 1932 election. On the Way to California the Chisum family stayed

August, 1932.

⁵⁸ *Afro American* (Washington D.C.), 3 December 1932.

in Muskogee with the T. J. Elliots on 301 N 11th street. It is no question that in the late teens and early 1920s Oklahoma had a growing American-African power structure. It was still recovering from the riot and fires of Black Wall Street in the Tulsa. Numerous all-black towns, leading black newspapers, growing black law firms, and several American black oil dynasties, were all established in the early twentieth century under the watchful eyes of Booker T. Washington. Blacks were trading oil and cotton with Liberia and European countries. Before the Tulsa Riots and the bombing of Greenwood in 1921, Oklahoma was becoming an American black mecca.

From Muskogee Oklahoma, he headed to Fort Worth where the Chisum's were guests of Colonel William M. McDonald "Gooseneck Bill" secretary of the Masons of Texas, and president of the Fraternal Bank and Trust Company. His son recalled:

We drove from Chicago to Los Angeles in a leisurely fashion. Daddy would drive to the black parts of town with dilapidated buildings and no sidewalks to find lodging. Daddy would say ["M] other [,] you and sister stay here while I find someone I know.["] We left the car. I know it was never more than fifteen feet before someone hailed "Melvin Chisum" wherever we went. This happened over and over again.⁵⁹

They traveled through Big Springs Texas, to El Paso, New Mexico, Phoenix, Arizona into Los Angeles. According to his daughter Anne, Chisum worked for the *California Eagle* when they lived in California. It was a black newspaper in Los

⁵⁹ Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., to Author, 10 June 2007, OKCU.

Angeles. My Dad and the publisher spent a lot of time together. Dad wrote various articles, one kind after another, for the *Eagle*. After the election, we moved back to Philadelphia. His main agenda, however, was to cover the West Coast for Roosevelt and to repel the message of Congressman Oscar De Priest, whom Chisum debated before a large crowd of Democrats while in California.⁶⁰ The man modern historians consider no more than a “spy and provocateur” was the man Farley believed worthy enough to debate the Republican Party’s most reputable black man to obtain the black vote for Franklin D. Roosevelt. “My father was involved in politics and I realize, in retrospect, that he went to California to be involved in the election.”⁶¹

Before two thousand Democrats, here Saturday of last week, Melvin Chisum, well-known newspaperman, gave the lie to Congressman Oscar De Priest, GOP campaign orator, who had preceded him as GOP campaigner. Mr. Chisum said, “De Priest fell short of the truth. He did not tell all the truth about the Republican Party. And as for the veterans, yes, he lied on them. I was in Washington at the time and the boys deported themselves creditably at all times. They were not molesting government property but the rich men of the country knew that those men were not being treated fairly and they became uneasy. Mr. Hoover became afraid and ordered them to be evicted. De Priest lied to you. A man who would lie to you about one thing will lie to you about all things.” Mr. Chisum made it clear that he was not fighting the Republicans but all his work is being done against the president and his gang.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Linda Twine, *Conversations* (New York: Self Published, 1991). OKCU.

⁶² “Speech Before 2000 Democrats,” *San Francisco Spokesman*, (San Francisco) 20 October 1932. The “veterans” reference is to the “Bonus Army” of thousands of World War I veterans and their supporters who gathered in Washington in 1932 to demand cash payment of their service certificates.

Chisum obtained support from white Democrats after facing the political rivalry in the person of Oscar De Priest. His pockets were “lined with money for the cause” as he traveled home. However, some black leaders such as Roscoe Dunjee of Oklahoma City, who slowly pulled away from the Republican Party but was not really committed to either party organization, condemned Chisum for his harsh words about the highest-ranking black in the United States. Dunjee did not understand the power and sway Chisum held in national politics. He said to Chisum:

If men like you are going to travel all over this nation and destroy the idealism that Negroes are developing in Negro congressmen you are going to retard a generation the logical return to Negroes from such congressional districts. If you can remember the virtues in Oscar De Priest and forget his faults, you will accelerate in a large measure and [the] momentum which is gathering. . . .⁶³

Chisum, who had stopped in Oklahoma on the way back north, twinkled at Dunjee and continued his political agenda, both chastised and invigorated that Dunjee listened, even if he did not understand. Dunjee may have had the newspaper Chisum once owned but Chisum’s pockets were filled with donations to the campaign and he did not care.

Chisum + Patronage + I.W. Young and the Big Four

Roosevelt’s election as president of the United States was believed to be a victory for American blacks. However, for many politicians who suffered through

⁶³ *Black Dispatch*, (Oklahoma City), 2 March 1932.

Reconstruction earlier in their lives, the New Deal seemed to be the same old deal. Blacks knew within weeks that even with the Big Four in place, and overwhelming support of blacks for the Democratic ticket at the polls, racism and the economics of the Great Depression resulted in a lack of patronage for blacks at the beginning of Roosevelt's presidency. No matter how liberal the New Deal wanted to be, the placement of blacks into political positions in the Democratic Party was a paradigm shift that had to be handled with caution.⁶⁴ However, blacks still believed a symbiotic patronage system was implicit between white and black politicians even during times of overt racism and depression. Therefore, black Democratic politicians who voted for Roosevelt expected to receive their restricted share of the spoils to use within their specific communities.⁶⁵ Even those who gained patronage positions or made the final crossing found it was like tripping up with every step. In 1932, at both state and national levels, the patronage system for blacks broke down. Racism and the economics of the Great Depression resulted in a lack of patronage at top levels of government. Blacks seeking positions in the federal government

⁶⁴ Charles Hurd, *When the New Deal Was Young and Gay* (New York: Hawthorne Books Inc., 1965), 225. Because of the racial prejudice of his day Roosevelt could not move in the direction of appointing Negroes to his cabinet. Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., *Roosevelt and Howe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1962), 269. Louis Howe, a reporter and advisor to Roosevelt, wrote to the president that he had to be careful in answering letters to blacks. Southern supporters would be lost if the president was too accommodating.

⁶⁵ See Brooks, "Oklahoma's First Black Governor," for patronage relationship between I. W. Young and John C. "Jack" Walton. See Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, *American Pharaoh, Mayor Richard J. Daley: His Battle for Chicago and the Nation* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2000), for the relationship between Mayor Daley of Chicago and Tammany Hall Negroes. See David Conrads, "Biography of Dr. William J. Thompkins, 1884 -1944, Physician and Hospital Administrator," for information on patronage between Thompkins and the Pendergast Machine, online at Kansas City Public Library: www.kclibrary.org, 1999.

responded by using formal ties such as political relationships, and informal ties to Washington, D.C., insiders such as Melvin Jackson Chisum to demand such spoils.

“We have the receipt of ferns seed: we walk invisible . . .”⁶⁶ In helping the Democrats win the election Chisum emptied his pockets of fern seed. In order to fight against his greatest foe, Hoover as Jim Crow, he brought to light his mastery of intrigue, his presence in congressional halls was no longer ghostly, his dynamism as a journalist no longer restricted to the eyes of blacks and his ability to lead masses of blacks across the country. These abilities became an albatross instead of a benefit. He shape-shifted into the kind of black man that intimidated white leadership --a Melvin Chisum with the power of a Martin Luther King - but who did not want to be a king.

In the year 1933 as Vann predicted Chisum was the powerful black man in Washington D.C. Letters unearthed between him and I. W. Young show his capability to make appointments through Farley’s henchmanship. Chisum’s position dealing patronage aided the Big Four in landing positions in government that the Democrats did not hoard for their own white constituencies. Chisum worked for Ickes before his appointment in the PWA in 1934. Even before he was appointed as an agent Chisum was started work for the government as a detective or agent of the PWA. He was sent to Oklahoma in 1933 to discuss their potential for grants. His application

⁶⁶ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV. Samuel Hemingway, The Second Part of Henry the Fourth* (New Haven: Oxford University Press, 1921), 96.

for the position read that he did some satisfactory work for the government before he was hired.⁶⁷

Robert Vann entered his new office in Washington with enthusiasm and left with his pride intact but without the earlier idealism that the government would give blacks anything but the same old deal. Buni wrote that the day Vann arrived in Washington was a hot July afternoon. His mind filled with the personal promise of his new position.⁶⁸ Like I. W. Young he longed for the ability to finally to support his pledges of patronage to others. Faced with such isolation and disrespect in his position, it soon got hot in his office. Patronage was not forthcoming. Weiss described its limits in *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* "Vann's own position impressive as it may have been in title, proved to be a disappointment. His office accommodations were woefully inadequate; stenographers resisted taking his dictation because of his race, and he could not even get an appointment to see the attorney general."⁶⁹ Vann left his position to reclaim full editorship of the *Pittsburg Courier*. The administration used these black journalists as a way to stifle the black agenda. If the newspaper was the most powerful sword the blacks had then who controlled the leading newspapermen controlled blacks in the United States. Vann finally came to the conclusion that "I'm not doing anything here. It looks like they

⁶⁷ U.S. Department of Interior, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works *Personnel File Melvin Chisum*, February 1934. Used with permission of Anne Johnson Chisum Angeles, California.

⁶⁸ Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburg Courier Politics and Black Journalism*, 221.

⁶⁹ Weiss, *Farewell To the Party of Lincoln*, 44.

put me down here in Washington to shut me up.”⁷⁰ He packed and left Washington.

Chisum would eventually come to the same conclusion. The trick was on them again.

Farley called the executive members of the Big Four to Washington in February of 1933. Black leaders understood that it was their job to help government officials “see” American blacks and their needs. Reasoning that the country was actually changing under the New Deal, newspapers published reports of the great meeting, the men’s agenda, and the fact that they (and Chisum) had actually talked with President Roosevelt. The Big Four presented these suggestions:

1. The definite end of discrimination against Negroes in the Civil service.
2. The definite end of segregation of the Negro and white workers in governmental departments.
3. The definite end of the flagrant and long-standing violations of the Jim Crow laws of the South in inter-state travel.
4. The insistence that Congress enforce the 14th and 15th Amendments and that the President himself do so in his capacity as Chief Executive.
5. The definite recognition of the support given to the President by Negro voters and party workers and increase of the number of appointments in the diplomatic service and all other government appointive jobs.
6. The immediate adoption of a hands-off, friendly-neighbor policy toward Haiti and Liberia.
7. The general disposition to recognize especially the fact that Negroes have serious problems due to color prejudice and that it is necessary and desirable that he take immediate steps to impress upon the nation the fact that he is opposed to its treatment of the Negro, and wishes to improve the status of the Negro people.
8. The definite end of the decomposition of Negro regiments and their exile to Georgia and the Mexican borders, the opening up of technical branches of the Army and Navy to Negroes and the end of segregation and discrimination practiced in the Citizens Training Camps.

⁷⁰ Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburg Courier Politics and Black Journalism*, 221.

Neither Roosevelt nor the National Democratic Party promised to follow through on any of their promises. Nor did they readily patronize the leadership of the Big Four. As of July 1933, only one of the Big Four leaders, Robert L. Vann, obtained a patronage appointment. Senator Joseph Guffey pleaded with President Roosevelt that Vann be appointed as assistant attorney general without confirmation of the Senate. Roosevelt did not interfere; the position was one of the patronage “jobs” Guffey had as a congressman to give out at will.⁷¹ While Thompkins asked for a traditional post for a black--minister to Haiti--Roosevelt appointed a white Democrat to the post. Thompkins was appointed recorder of deeds for Washington D.C. Months before his appointment Chisum worked with the government doing missions on contract around the country. In February of 1934 Chisum became an investigator for the Public Works Authority

On the state level in Oklahoma the predicament of black leaders receiving any kind of payment or patronage grew dire. During the Depression black leaders such as I. W. Young of Oklahoma and his loyal Democrats used their own money to further the cause, believing they would receive patronage positions to barter.⁷² Young represented the Big Four in Oklahoma. With the aid of black votes, William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray won the gubernatorial race in Oklahoma in 1930. Murray’s administration in Oklahoma proceeded much like the national administration. Black Democrats soon learned that Southern Democrats—not New Deal men—comprised

⁷¹ Joseph Guffey, *Seventy Years on the Red-Fire Wagon: From Tilden to Truman Through New Freedom and the New Deal* (Mahomedan Press, 2010), 171.

⁷² Attorney J. J. Evans to I. W. Young, 1 June 1933; H. W. McNamee to I. W. Young, 12 November 1932; W. C. Owen to I. W. Young, 17 November 1932, OKCU.

Murray's administration. Young, the most successful black Democrat in Oklahoma, was ostracized and not made the "black governor" as he had been under Jack Walton. In a letter to R. M. McCool, the Democratic chair, Young wrote,

I feel that the selection of Negroes for purely Negro places should be done upon the advice and with the support of the Negro Democrats of the state. A movement is underfoot in this county to do just the opposite. . . .There are several Negro Post offices, among them Langston, Boley and Clearview, which must be considered. I believe that Negro Democrats have suffered long and enough to enjoy these places. Then too, you and I can show these loyal Negroes that we appreciate their loyalty.⁷³

Murray and McCool allowed white Democrats to give patronage to their own chosen black appointees and friends, not necessarily those who worked in the campaign. Murray allowed his administration to replace some traditional black political positions with white workers. Young was put off when he attempted to see Murray about appointments. When he got no assistance from the state committee or the governor's office, helplessness overcame Young as he wrote to R.M. McCool:

I have taken so much abuse, suffered many inconveniences, spent so much time and money and supported my party politics so unreservedly that I ought to have some say as the head of a fine Negro organization of Democrats, as to who are the men and women best prepared to receive these honors and fill these positions. I say without any egotism or any desire to dictate the policies of the Democratic Party. I am only asking that I be permitted to advise with the powers that be; may I respectfully ask that you drop me a line, giving me the accepted procedure that you and the organization propose to follow in these matters? Our organization is preparing to ask that one of our men, viz., O.B. Jefferson be indorsed for the

⁷³ I. W. Young to R. M. McCool, 20 December 1932, OKCU.

Assistant United States Attorney Generalship that is now being held by a Negro from Kansas.⁷⁴

As the Negro Democratic leader, Young begged for respect when it came to patronage disbursements. He wrote Oklahoma Congressman F. B. Swank asking for the chance to at least give his opinion on who would get the postal position in Langston: "Not that you are not capable, not knowing the situation but I think you should have some honest, intelligent advice in the premise."⁷⁵ Young simply was no longer treated like the black governor. Even though Murray praised Young and gave him gifts, Murray allowed money from patronage brokering to go to white politicians. In response Young formed committees to meet with the governor, to no avail.⁷⁶ Young had challenges. A month after the election, using the system established by the Big Four, Lewine Weaver wrote to Young expecting assistance in a patronage position:

Now it is my desire to secure a political job through a representative or senator from Oklahoma. To do this one needs the backing of one in power there in the state and I know of no better man to which I might appeal than you. I know Dr. Young, that you understand just how to go about it and I am asking that you do this for me and whatever charges are I would be glad to remit should I get in.⁷⁷

Young's reply followed:

⁷⁴ I. W. Young to R.W. McCool, 20 December 1932, OKCU.

⁷⁵ I. W. Young to F. B. Swank, 27 December 1932, OKCU.

⁷⁶ I. W. Young to J. C. Evans, 11 June 1933; J. C. Evans to I. W. Young, 21 May 1933, OKCU.

⁷⁷ Lewine Weaver to I. W. Young, 21 November 1932, OKCU.

I shall be pleased to do whatever I can to help you to obtain your desire. See the Congressmen and Senators there and Oklahoma, determine what you want to do – what you would like to have, and inform me of the same, together with their attitude. Try to give me the attitude of each one approached. I will then be sufficiently informed to recommend you.⁷⁸

Over the next several months, ambitious Democrats flooded Young's desk at Langston with requests. Young's plan of doing all he could for the Negro Democrats of Oklahoma became a game of patience and embarrassment.⁷⁹ Under Governors Walton and Martin Trapp, Young had a say in the hiring of leaders for all black-run institutions, which gave him overwhelming political power. He no longer had patronage over the roster of the post offices in the black townships or a say in the positions at Langston. He appealed to McCool for state positions but received no help. When traditional black appointments came to the table, Governor Murray favored Young, but Young "did not know if it was a safe thing" to approach the governor."⁸⁰ When traditional avenues were closed, Young, like other blacks, resorted to their own man of affairs in Congress--Melvin Chisum. William Thompkins, the chairperson of the Big Four, was also having a "great struggle" in Kansas. He wrote to Young attempting to sell a rotogravure to the university and finished the letter on a personal note:

You, like myself, have had a great struggle. Everything that we've got we've had to fight like the devil for! Whatever you have obtained, God knows that you deserve because you've never had anything come to you easily. Write to

⁷⁸ I. W. Young to Lewine Weaver, 8 December 1932, OKCU.

⁷⁹ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 11 August 1933, OKCU.

⁸⁰ I. W. Young to Attorney J. C. Evans, 1 June 1933, OKCU.

me and let me know how you are getting along. If I can help you in any way, let me know.⁸¹

Thompkins should have been given patronage leadership for blacks as chairman of the Big Four. Instead of Thompkins, I. W. Young contacted Melvin Chisum for help. He and other Oklahomans from the Negro Democratic State Central Committee decided to get behind a member of the executive committee in order to get him a national appointment, O. B. Jefferson.

Then back in Washington, D. C., Chisum told Young that he was “sitting pretty with the Administration and stand to get a lot more done than a man who is striving to get himself a job.”⁸² However, jobs in the New Deal administration were not plentiful for black Democrats. Chisum seemed challenged himself. He sent Young a list of vacancies for blacks. It was his first time to work in the world of congressional patronage brokering and he perceived something different:

There are many applicants for places both black and white, many more than can possibly be taken care of. I would say there are fifty applicants for every place which is to be filled, but only those will get jobs whose sponsors can get up to distributing through. Fortunately for us I am on the inside and am not a candidate for a place, not for myself I mean.⁸³

A standard procedure had been set up to get jobs through Chisum and the Big Four. For some reason, O. B. Jefferson did not understand the overall process of how

⁸¹ William Thompkins to I. W. Young, 3 October 1933, OKCU.

⁸² Melvin Chisum to O. B. Jefferson, 29 May 1933, OKCU.

⁸³ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 29 May 1933, OKCU.

to get a patronage position for himself, or he thought he was in Big Four standing with Young. Young outranked him as state chairman of the Negro Democrats and as a member of the Big Four team of the National Democratic Negro Voter's League. Jefferson coveted a position in the Justice Department in Washington, D.C. Young supported him first by sending letters to the members of the state committee, then followed with letters to McCool. However, Young was strategic. He manipulated the state system first to develop a backing for Jefferson's national office opportunity. In this, Young had the backing of Chisum, who wrote, "You are the first colored leader I have ever met in politics who is trying to help his supporters instead of trying to get a job for himself. And because of this very laudable attitude on your part you may rest assured of my most loyal support of every man whom you select."⁸⁴

In an obvious show of disrespect to Young, Jefferson breached the system by contacting Chisum directly by letter, and without Young's permission or knowledge, asking for help to gain a national position. Files show that Chisum redirected all the information he received from Jefferson back to Young. The Big Four had agreed (and at this point the assumption must be that Chisum also agreed) that "none of us will move without a common consent of the others and we must take anybody who tries to do so to the butcher."⁸⁵

Blacks themselves may have lost many patronage positions if the correspondence between Jefferson, Chisum, and Young is an example of how Negroes dealt with the real national patronage system whites used. Jefferson was

⁸⁴ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 11 August 1933, OKCU.

⁸⁵ *The Union*, (Cincinnati), 2 February 1933.

not butchered, but he was put in his place for not using the national system. Chisum rerouted Jefferson's letter back to the only Oklahoma representative for the Big Four, I. W. Young. Jefferson had written to Chisum: "I am not unmindful of the fact that the tender of your good offices were perhaps personal to Dr. Young; however, I would appreciate some expression from you as to your attitude toward my aspirations and if you could lend your influence to further them."⁸⁶ In Chisum's reply, he stipulated a cost of five hundred dollars for the service to be rendered—one hundred dollars up front and then one hundred dollars a month when Jefferson received the position. Chisum's reply also included the following:

Assuming that you will go along the line which I shall lay down, I have gone ahead with the plan of trying to place you in the post formerly held by Judge Houston of Gary, Ind., in the Postmaster General's office. I have made this selection because I know you would not have a chance to get the post in the Department of Justice. That has been promised by Mr. Farley to the Honorable Robert L. Vann of Pittsburg.⁸⁷

Chisum then responded to Young about Jefferson's situation and included a listing of jobs called "THE VIRGIN ISLAND SET UP." The document was included as a part of Senate Bill 173. Chisum marked the positions that would be considered for a black man, each of which paid approximately two thousand dollars a year. On August 19, 1933, Chisum wrote to Young:

[I am] conferring with Mr. Farley about Negro positions. I found him in a most happy frame of mind. He said to me that he realized that little has been done insofar as the colored people are concerned, but, he said, "Chisum, you

⁸⁶ Melvin Chisum to O. B. Jefferson, 29 May 1933, OKCU.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

write this down and remember that I mean it, we are going to deal justly with the colored friends, we know what they are up against and are going to treat them far better than the Republicans have.⁸⁸

Jefferson balked at the prospect of paying for a position, but nonetheless sent the first installment through I. W. Young. Chisum immediately got to work attempting to get Jefferson appointed to the recorder of deeds office in Washington, D. C. However, Jefferson did not respond when Chisum attempted twice to get information from him. The frustrated Chisum wrote to Young:

When we talked last, I promised you that I would immediately get busy and get things so shaped that we could get Mr. Jefferson appointed to the Recorder of Deeds office and I did exactly as I agreed. When things were in shape that I was ready to present his name I wrote that the petition be sent forward immediately. To this letter I have had no reply. Twice I promised to deliver this formal document; when it was not in my hands last Wednesday August 30 and no word from you I was, as you will see, plainly in the air. I do not allow any situation to keep me in the air long; so I asked for three days and I went to Poughkeepsie New York and got a man whom I know can fill the bill in every particular. The enclosures are merely sent you that you may possess the name and have a hint of the relation existing between the man and me. Watch the Negro papers and you will realize that I was telling you only the truth when I said I could and would deliver this post for you.⁸⁹

Jefferson finally responded on September 11, 1933, that he knew Chisum was “there on the ground”; however, he refused to send original endorsements. Jefferson noted, “My endorsements are on file with both of the Oklahoma Senators. I am

⁸⁸ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 19 August 1933, OKCU.

⁸⁹ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 6 September 1933, OKCU.

enclosing some copies, which you may find useful, and you would certainly have access to the originals as my senators must be in accord with our efforts.” Jefferson did not “desire to come to Washington to urge my candidacy, and will not unless and until I am assured that we are in striking distance, or a personal interview with the appointing power is desired.” As for the papers and other endorsements Chisum needed, Jefferson admonished Chisum, “Ordinarily the character, rather than the number of endorsements for a political appointment, counts for most.”⁹⁰ Jefferson did not understand the policy of Farley or the fraternal order of politics. On October 14, Chisum wrote to Young:

As I have already written you, I am furthering the candidacy of another man for the Recorder of Deeds place, because I was left in a “hole” could not hear from you and had to get a candidate and get one quick. I am of the opinion that the President will have made public the announcement of my man. You are aware that the proper practice is, to not mention the names in advance of the President’s announcement. All details were finished an hour ago and I am returning to my home in Philadelphia. No practical word from Mr. Jefferson suggests to me that he either thinks I am obligated to work for him and pay the “freight” myself, or he thinks I am a fool. *When I had but little experience and my influence was negligible, I went about serving any and all men at my own expense; I do not have to do that now.* I have no intention of going forward for any man in Oklahoma but you, purely on the basis of friendship.⁹¹

Did other blacks in the country try to override the system set up for their patronage positions on the national level? Did they attempt to go around Farley’s Big Four to petition their own congressmen? Could such behavior, as well as the

⁹⁰ O. B. Jefferson to Melvin Chisum, 11 September 1933, OKCU.

⁹¹ Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 14 October 1933, OKCU.

racism intrinsic in the Democratic system, be a reason for some lack of black positions? Jefferson decided not to use the Big Four system. He was overlooked by Oklahoma congressmen, blackballed by black leaders, despised by Chisum, and ostracized by Young. His Democratic political career ended locally and he had no chance nationally, all because he brushed aside the paradigm used by the Big Four.

Perhaps part of the problem was that, like O. B. Jefferson, many New Deal black leaders sabotaged themselves. However, Chisum's last recorded letter to Young described the problems of the New Deal and black appointments: "Of course many places have been filled, but 98% of the places filled are key jobs where it was essential in order to introduce the administration power. Thus, we have no reason to be discouraged."⁹² He sent Young another official listing of job openings in the Virgin Islands marked with posts for Americans blacks.⁹³ President Roosevelt and Congress had other major problems with which to deal. According to Chisum, American black work was intentionally pushed to the bottom of the agenda.

Because both the state and federal governments refused to overhaul civil rights legislation, patronage was one of the few forms of political acknowledgment blacks expected. Even in modern times, some people do not know that patronage jobs were brokered. It was a means of earning extra income for those who were experts in procuring the right person for a position. The brokers functioned like a national human resource department. It took time, knowledge of the position, and knowledge of personalities to develop the leadership of a nation. Robert Vann

⁹² Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 31 October 1933, OKCU.

⁹³ Original list included in the Leonelle Young Hargrove Collection, OKCU.

withstood the rigors of the office that Guffey gave him for a short period. However, men like Forrester Washington appointed as FERA race advisor by Will Alexander did not last a year.

Crossing Over, Tripping up and Ending Accommodation

Except in the records of the PWA and some black newspapers, few people know the history of the first black agent, Melvin Chisum, hired by the PWA. The Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works hired Chisum as a “special agent” in the Division of Investigations, Public Works Administration at the age of 61 years. The justification was not that it was a patronage position but simply that the Division was in need of an additional Special Agent in the Washington office.

Chisum’s work as a “publicity agent” for Booker T. Washington of Tuskegee Institute from October 1899 to 1912 served as his reference along with the sentence “Mr. Chisum did some special work for this division which was entirely satisfactory.”⁹⁴ His government grade was set at 11 with a salary of \$3200. While working for the government he continued to write the president and Mrs. Roosevelt asking for privileges for Mary McLeod Bethune and Alice Dunbar Nelson.

Chisum’s letters to Eleanor Roosevelt seemed to be what spurred her on the path to helping black women and finding her niche as a presidential wife. Blanche

⁹⁴ U.S. Department of Interior, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works *Personnel File Melvin Chisum*, February 1934, Anne Johnson Chisum Collection, Los Angeles, California.

Cook in *Eleanor Roosevelt The Defining Years* and Paul Bernstein, in *Letters to Eleanor* both suggest that Chisum's letter to Eleanor as chair of the Committee of Mobilization for Human Needs Campaign in January of 1934 suggesting that "a capable intelligent negro woman of fine training should be chosen . . ." ⁹⁵ which led to the relationship between Eleanor and Mary McLeod Bethune. When Eleanor Roosevelt's secretary contacted Walter White's and Ickes' office for a background on Chisum, Ickes response was to move Chisum away from Washington and deeper into the field in the South of the United States. His response in a letter to Eleanor's secretary it shows that Chisum was once again in his place as a walking race delegate in congress. There were fears as to what he could accomplish. "This man Chisum is a good deal of a troublemaker, as I know from past experience. I am glad that you called this matter to my attention thus gives me an opportunity to supply you with the facts." ⁹⁶ The letter is from Ickes office yet in comparison to later writings about Chisum in Ickes' diary and considering Ickes intent to keep Chisum when others like Harry Hopkins who did not want Chisum in the Department of Interior, brings up questions as to the authorship. Added shorthand and notes on the letter also poses questions as to the authorship of the missive. It seems Chisum's race work did not bode well with someone in the office of the Interior. Nonetheless,

⁹⁵ Blanche Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt the Defining Years 1933-1938* (London: Penguin, 1999). 100. Paul Bernstein, *Letters to Eleanor: Voices of the Great Depression* (Indiana: Arthorhouse, 2004), 34.

⁹⁶ Harold Ickes to Eleanor Roosevelt, 28 November 1934; Folder Ickes, Harold, Correspondence with Government Departments 1934, Papers of Eleanor Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

Chisum established a relationship for himself with Eleanor Roosevelt concerning race.

After a year constantly switching regions by order of Harold Ickes' office, Chisum became disillusioned. He realized that his position was being used to stop him from working for civil rights for blacks. He wrote to Robert Russa Moton:

The department has systematically kept me out of what is happening to colored people by keeping me from the seat of government. This has been engineered by the Rosenwald influence within the Department. They have kept me very busy too, so that I could not find time for writing or working for the interests of the Negro.⁹⁷

He contacted his former employer Samuel Insull who suggested Chisum talk to the Firestone family who needed someone with Chisum's capabilities on their payrolls. Over the next few years Chisum worked for the government but grew weary. He faced race discrimination as the only black agent in offices around the country. His work as a journalist, race leader, and helping Tuskegee was limited. Each time Chisum attempted to do work for the race, his articles appeared in papers, or he wrote letters to Democratic leaders, or various districts rejected him for being a black, Ickes' moved him. On October 5th of 1934 Chisum was transferred from Washington to New York; December 5th 1934 he was transferred from New York to Chicago; March 25th 1935 was transferred from Chicago to San Francisco; July 1935 from San Francisco to Atlanta. Moton's resignation from Tuskegee in 1935 because

⁹⁷ Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton, 1 January 1935. Robert Russa Moton Papers Archives and Special Collections, Tuskegee University, Tuskegee, AL. (Hereafter cited as Moton Papers.)

of poor health reasons seemed to stem the tide of Chisum's mourning over not being able to aid Tuskegee's finances.

During this period of the 1930s the NAACP changed leadership and developed goals attuned to the political and social climate. In 1931 James Weldon Johnson resigned. Walter White stepped into his shoes and changed the goals of the organization by taking on more racial issues. The NAACP defended the Scottsboro boys accused of raping two white women. NAACP work began to mirror the work of the Army of Lions earlier in the century. While Bookerites labored within government chambers under the foot of Roosevelt administration the NAACP was left to deal with issues on the cultural front. In *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, David Levering Lewis describes the time period as one of "the healing of rifts between Bookerites and DuBoisians," and a paradigm shift.⁹⁸

Certainly, Emmett Scott put out his right hand to DuBois. In 1935 DuBois published *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*. Perhaps seeing their own identity and footsteps for the first Emmett Scott it was time to change. Instead of their bantering they had done over the years – and the lawsuits between them – Scott and DeBois made a truce. Scott responded to DuBois' book, "the colored people of the world owed DuBois a debt of gratitude." Lewis directs the reader's attention that a pattern shift took place or needed to take place in Democracy and the ways of fighting for justice. He wrote that the book represented one of those genuine paradigm shifts periodically experienced in a field of knowledge, one that

⁹⁸ Lewis, *W.E. B DuBois, The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919-1963*, 2, 366.

forces reinterpretations of the past by its sudden and disorienting emergence.⁹⁹ A paradigm shift struck them like a gale of wind. In the decade of the 1930s Melvin Chisum laid down his cloak of a hero for the masses and his Oliver typewriter for the security of a paycheck for his family. I. W. Young gave up his presidency at Langston. Racism as Jim Crow grew into such a bitter rival even Young could not sell the bigotry of the Democratic Party to his Oklahoma constituency. Roscoe Dunjee took over as race leader in the Democratic Party.

Ickes intentionally kept Melvin Chisum so busy putting out fires around the country that he could not resume his role as a race leader. He wrote:

I am deeply grieved that the assignments took me entirely out of the field of the East. Have made one blunder in this position I occupy, I did the work jam-up from the very beginning, and when ever there are eggs to be unscrambled, middle west, south or southwest, they have rushed me off to do the unscrambling and I have met with considerable success.¹⁰⁰

Finally, Chisum began to sabotage his work in order to be fired by the PWA. When Chisum pleaded and was not given a vacation he took off and went to visit Moton. "The department seems bound to keep me engaged far from home and you," he wrote. Then he skipped work. Multiple charges against his time management, and race issues were written in a report against him. Chisum did things "his way" instead of by government regulations. Finally, on September 24, 1936 Chisum resigned "in order to pursue some private interests of my own." He wrote, "I have

⁹⁹ Ibid., 367.

¹⁰⁰ Melvin Chisum to Robert Russa Moton, 20 January 1936. Moton Papers.

need to be absent from duty for a limited period of time. I am therefore resigning as of September 25, 1936.”¹⁰¹

It seems from correspondence that he went on the campaign trail. However, at this election there are few records of his newspaper articles. In the same month of his resignation, his publication of “Why the Negro Is For Roosevelt” was published. In a congratulatory letter of November 6th Moton applauded Chisum as the “one who can deliver the goods.”¹⁰² Ickes rehired Chisum as a special agent after the election. In July of 1937 headlines read “The Father of Black Democracy is Dead.” Chisum and Emmett Scott attended Dr. Isaac William Young’s funeral in Langston, Oklahoma. Their pictures show a type of mourning on their faces. Their generation was changing out for new movements. Young’s death ended of an era of Bookerite politics in Oklahoma. Young’s body was buried on the campus of Langston University. Inman Page was buried on the campus in 1935. Mimicking Abraham Lincoln’s resurrection in American Civil Religion, whose body was moved from its original resting place; in 1977 Young’s body was exhumed and moved to Guthrie, Oklahoma by his grand daughter the late, Honorable Dr. Joy Hargrove.

Chisum remained with the Department of Interior until June 1938.¹⁰³ He was forced to resign. It is not clear whether he created a scandal with an Italian

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of Interior, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works *Personnel File Melvin Chisum*, Melvin Chisum to Hon. A. R. Class, 24 September 1936, (Hereafter cited as Johnson Collection.)

¹⁰² Robert Russa Moton to Chisum, 6 November 1936. Moton Papers.

¹⁰³ U.S. Department of Interior, Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works *Personnel File Melvin Chisum*, 19 November 1936. Anne Johnson Chisum personal Collection, Los Angeles, California. (Hereafter cited as Johnson papers.)

contractor who was linked to one of his projects or he was set up, by the Italian and Chisum's PWA manager. Chisum felt sorry for the "poor Italian." He wrote alerting Louis Lombardi of meddling and pestering tactics that were to come from a resident inspector for the general state authority. Lombardi turned in the letter to the PWA. Over the years, complaints about him as a black, his personal work style, and bookkeeping could not get him fired. Some of his charges that mounted over the years point to self-sabotage. Working from within the administration, as the only black man with the power of government and in control of millions of dollars, it was like his work in World War I (see chapter 4). This time he stood for the government committing the misdeeds and there was no one to above him stop the acts of misuse of power.as he watched plain people get waylaid in government practices. Tired of his own problems of racism, secretaries who despised him for his blackness, stringent rules set for investigators, and a lack of free time, and more Chisum lost faith in the Roosevelt Administration himself and in his invincibility as a hero of plain people. order to get back to race work. Finally, Ickes was forced by Chisum and the mounting tension within the PWA leadership to let Chisum, the black man, be fired or resign. Chisum resigned.

The world had changed since Chisum left his entrepreneurial business ventures. A new generation of philanthropists, sons of his progressive friends ran enterprises differently and with their on men on call. Emmett Scott offered Chisum a position at the Sun Shipping Corporation. The position was tied to unions so after one day at work Chisum quit. He created his own small journalism agency out of

which he did missions. He reverted to pre-1914 pugilism style to work as a bouncer in restaurants and back to missions. He did not tell his wife his family. His son Melvin excelled in college. Melvin planned to become a lawyer. But he went off to serve in World War II. His daughter Anne attended nursing school. His wife went back to nursing. Chisum went back to aiding blacks in a world that had changed since he had become a government man.

Even Tuskegee had changed from 1932 to 1940. The cover of the *Afro American* newspaper on June 4th 1940, featured the article "Dr. R.R. Moton Dead." Chisum's powerful, loving friend Robert Russa Moton had inhaled and exhaled his last breath. Unlike Louis Harlan's belief that Washington's influence died in 1915, Moton's death was its end. The new leader at Tuskegee was not a Bookerite. Though Frederick Douglass Patterson needed the support of Chisum to raise funds; Patterson represented the introduction of new ideas for black reform and education.

As Chisum attempted to find work during the next few years he wrote about the death of Progressives such as he. The dates of the lives of men in these chapters show that during the 1930s men who were philanthropists, enemies, and leaders worked with or opposed Chisum, and Tuskegee Machine had slowly died leaving a skeletal crew to bring about change in a country that was still bigoted and a world blighted by the racism that led to the United States entering WWII. Indeed, a paradigm shift took place in 1940 within black America. On August 3, 1940, the *Afro American* Newspaper featured two families as the new leaders of blacks in the

United States. The *Afro American* displayed the first picture of the W.E.B. Du Bois family *ever printed* in a newspaper and another of Walter White and his family.¹⁰⁴

After his stint with the Department of Interior Chisum's journalism career never reached the heights he attained before his government work. He campaigned as a Democrat for Wendell Wilkie but against the Roosevelt Administration. The mantle of the black social gospel seemed to leave him uncovered. The black newspapers dwindled to approximately twelve national leading papers. Chisum's work as a race man dwindled as the work of the NAACP took the form of the work he once did as a field agent within the Army of Lions. Chisum went to work with Emmett Scott at the Sun Shipyards. When the shipyard became unionized by way of his long time nemesis Asa Philip Randolph, he left. To make ends meet Chisum sold his Oliver typewriter. His wife continued to work as a nurse. Physically, Melvin Chisum died in a trolley accident on July 5, 1945. Parts of him died every year until that accident.

Blacks found their key or trick in European literature – like Shakespeare's Henry IV- carrying fern seed in their pockets. Being invisible, mimicking Uncle Tom, and standing as kingmakers in the white world helped them become leaders in the separate but equal world this group of blacks attempted to make just. The problem was separate was never equal and their blackness was never forgiven. The Machiavellians tricked them once more in giving government positions to hush them and slow their progress in race issues. During the Depression, a black man

¹⁰⁴ *Afro American* (Washington D.C.), 3 August 1940.

with a steady position was a rare commodity. In many ways Chisum reached the pinnacle of black life as an investigator he could not have reached doing missions and being a free-freelance journalist. In other ways he gave into his own worse fears of having to work for his own benefit to the point that he could not work for the race.¹⁰⁵

Modern historians have relied on the records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to understand historical ties of blacks to the New Deal and the end of the Progressive Era. Nancy Weiss in *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*, and Harvard Sitkoff in *A New Deal for Blacks* write of a lack of positions for blacks in the New Deal. Clues to Booker T. Washington's continued reform movement under men such as Chisum eluded many of them. Illuminating the experience of characters such as Melvin Chisum and his friend I. W. Young redirects the historical narrative. Historical lenses have been changing over the past ten years by moving away from DuBois' leadership and acknowledging the power of Booker T. Washington's reform well into the 1930s. This chapter helps the historian discover why in every narrative of the 1930s the name Melvin Chisum pops up out of nowhere. He was not a marginal character in the world of the 1930s but a main character. His work was buried in the wake of men who came after and added to his history or in those like Purvis who did not like him when he was living. When he died they cast him only in the role of working as a spy or underground in Chicago.

¹⁰⁵ *New York Age* (New York), 19 Dec. 1931. Melvin Chisum to I. W. Young, 11 August 1933. OKCU.

In its entirety, the chapter revises what twentieth-century and twenty-first century historians such as the late Louis Harlan, Raymond Smock, in the *Booker T. Washington Papers* (1972) et al, Raymond Smock's, *Booker T. Washington* (2009), Brian Kelly in his book, *Race, Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (2001), Pete Daniel in his 1970s article, "Black Power in the 1920s: The Case of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," Steven Fox in the book, *Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter (1970)*, Dr. Quintard Taylor professor emeritus of University of Washington class lectures, and others who theorized that Chisum at his zenith was no more than a villainous spy and provocateur for Booker T. Washington.¹⁰⁶ As a conscious decision they chose to describe Chisum in pejorative terms instead of following his career to the 1930s. Even in 1918 as an efficiency agent within Federal Division of Negro Economics, Chisum rose above the role of spy he played within the segregated Tuskegee Machine. He became the greatest living hero of his generation after Harriett Tubman died in 1914. American Blacks of all economic sectors knew he would give them Service, Service, Service in their times of need whether they had money to pay or not. Chisum's greatest foe and his greatest triumph was against Herbert Hoover's presidency. Supporting Roosevelt made him the most powerful black man in the country. While he did not land a political position behind his

¹⁰⁶ Harlan, *Booker T. Washington Papers*, 7; *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee 1901-1915*; Raymond Smock, *Booker T. Washington: Black Leadership in the Age of Jim Crow*, ed. John David Smith, The Library of African-American Biography (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2009); Brian Kelly, *Race Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Pete Daniel, "The Case of Tuskegee Veterans Hospital," *The Journal of Southern History* 36 (1970); Stephen Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter*, ed. August Meier, *Studies in American Negro Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

powerful display of leading black America for Democrats he was given an appointment that matched his prowess. His appointment in Department of Interior affirmed Chisum's career as an investigator and extends the honor of his vocation as a government detective. Harold Ickes, a man like Chisum who built himself up by his own boot straps, against a bigoted system, kept Chisum in the position with equality with the other PWA agents; Chisum had the same salary, the same rights, and the same kind of work in an America that was not ready for a black man with the power of the government and its money behind him. Much less were American businessmen and the Department of the Interior ready for a self made interrogator, detective with the character of Melvin Chisum!

Finally, in regards to Harvard Sitkoff's book *A New Deal For Blacks* (1978), in which he stated that no blacks voted in the South establishes the exception with data from Oklahoma and Chicago. In Oklahoma, the black vote used its potential to change elections as early as 1919.¹⁰⁷ A black Chicago district voted in the first black state Representative since Reconstruction, Oscar De Priest, in 1928. The ramifications of the vote in these areas drove the political activity of Melvin Chisum in the 1930s, and Chisum's activities revealed the final episode of the accommodation strategy of Booker T. Washington and the dawn of the post 1940 Civil Rights movement.

A Mystery Remains. Was Chisum Murdered?

¹⁰⁷ Sitkoff. 31.

Melvin Chisum Sr. died at the night of what had been a beautiful sunny day in July 1945, he lay under a trolley, while his son's military career had him in Okinawa, his wife and daughter at home at their leisure. Chisum told them he was headed to a job at a club where he was a "greeter," on the night he was struck and killed by a trolley. Anne, his wife, never fully believed the story of the accident especially by anything resembling a train. "She kept saying 'Daddy was so careful. He was always telling me to wait,'" according to his daughter Anne's Chisum – Johnson's memory. However, there was no investigation into Chisum's "accidental" death. "There was never any question into what really occurred," she said with a passionate pause, when she realized that in the 1940s then his family did not know his subversive life. "He walked in front of a trolley. At least that what we were told what happened," his daughter said. Seventy-three years later she now has some question.

What really happened to Melvin Jackson Chisum, Sr.? His son believed what he was told in 1946 when he returned home, that his father, going about his usual routine got off a trolley and walked in front of the moving train because he was not thinking. Researching his life, the author finds Melvin Chisum Sr.'s, death too neat for a prior detective, investigator and a man once again doing missions. Dr. Melvin Chisum, Jr., even drew a map to demonstrate the trolley death. He penned these words to the author with "all the points necessary to indicate what Dad was trying to do when he had his fatal accident."

Dad mounted the Route 10 trolley between 43rd and 44th streets, headed in town. He descended from the trolley in the passenger safety island on the south side of Market Street with the intention of crossing Market Street to

the other side of Market 70 car to take him out to 49th or 50th and Woodland. What happened to him or what was on his mind that he walked in front of the trolley car we will never know? Was he tired? Was he late? Was he in a hurry? Was there something on his mind that made him unaware of the dangerous steps he was about to take? Of course, the normal thing to do is to let the trolley car proceed and cross the street behind it. But then, a properly careful streetcar driver would be certain that the tracks were clear before proceeding. But there you have it.”¹⁰⁸

However, he did not know of his father’s work as a detective.

This biography Chisum’s Pilgrimage II brings to light newly discovered information about Melvin Chisum, Sr.’s. life from childhood to death which allows for at least an investigation into the circumstance of his death. Did someone or some people attack him or perhaps give him a nudge onto the tracks? There was no police investigation. By 1946 when his son came home, the facts were so neat he did not need to prove them. Under duress and grief his daughter did not question what was simple and to the point. Yet, adding in recent historiography and research of this dissertation the accident becomes suspicious as his wife Anne implied.

Melvin Chisum was a trained porter and a master of trains and train tracks. He knew them like he knew the keys of a typewriter. He was very careful according to his wife and daughter. Are there extenuating circumstances that would reopen the case of his death as murder? More than the enemies he made in the past as a politician, his underground work in Chicago, and during his government work stands out as reasons for a murder. There were other contemporary circumstances

¹⁰⁸ Dr. Melvin Chisum to author December 12, 2007. Letter is in author’s notebook.

of the time period that cited could reopen the idea of a murder versus an accident. According to his daughter her father was working for the Democratic Party on a mission that no one quite knew about except him and his inner circle. She believes that he was involved in the labor strike in Philadelphia. In the year 1944, he worked with the NAACP against one of the most powerful corporations in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania a labor union in order to have blacks and women hired trolley drivers and into other positions.

Labor historian, James Wolfinger, penned that the strike “demonstrated the profound racial cleavages, that divided the working class, not just in the south but across the nation.”¹⁰⁹ From the dissertation is learned that Chisum had a way of playing both sides in issues in his past. In the 1940s politics and the leadership that once backed him had changed. Progressive Era philanthropists and Robber Barons of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century did not run the companies. A new breed of businessmen had taken over with less personal ties to its “fixers.” Companies like the Philadelphia Transit Authority was so much grander than those black entities Chisum attacked had under BTW or A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, (BSCP) in the 1920s and 1930s. Had he been for or against the strike or attempted to play the middle as he had in so many missions of the past?

¹⁰⁹ James Wolfinger, "World War II Hate Strikes," in *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Benjamin Day Aaron Brennan, Immanuel Ness (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 2009). 126-137.

The headline in the *Baltimore Afro American*, “Melvin J. Chisum Trolley Car Victim Former Publisher and Veteran Politician, Supported Willkie, Pinned Under Trolley Operated By Woman,” seems a subtle hint that there may have been more to Chisum’s death than a momentary forgetfulness on his part. The newspaper reported that Chisum was struck on Saturday July 7 by a trolley car at 32nd Street and Lancaster Avenue. The article gave the woman driver’s name and address. It continued by stating, that “traffic at the intersection was stopped for fifteen minutes while workers jacked up the car to remove the victim.”¹¹⁰ Melvin Chisum was not dead. He was taken to a hospital. Why was it necessary to publish that it was a woman driver? Was there some bounty on his head? Was it the *Afro American* editor letting someone know that the murder did not go unnoticed?

The Philadelphia transit strike of 1944 was a sick-out, strike by white transit workers in Philadelphia from August 1 through August 6 1944. White workers protested the opening of jobs during a period of labor shortage to black conductors and motormen. Prior to the period blacks could only hold menial jobs. On the first of August eight blacks were about to make their trial runs when whites had a sick out strike. The strike was eventually broken through the Smith Connally Act – War Labor Disputes Act. Tom Connally, a Democrat from Texas, Chisum’s home state, presented the anti-union act, on September 5, 1942. By the mid 1940s Chisum fought against The Philadelphia Transportation Company (PTC) with the NAACP and others. PTC was one of the largest transit companies in the country. The act passed in 1943

¹¹⁰ *Afro American* (Baltimore), 14 July 1945. *Philadelphia Tribune* (Philadelphia), 14 July 1945.

overriding President Franklin Roosevelt's veto by both the House and the Senate because workers crippled the war industry when 300,000 war workers including workers at the Naval Yard could not get to work.

As early as 1943 NAACP's work was intricate in publicizing PTC's issues of racism within the Transit Workers Union. In 1944 the War Manpower Commission became involved in the PTC discriminatory hiring practices. They promoted eight blacks to skilled positions. When white workers found out they called in sick, blocked entrances, and eventually shut down the transit system. The military took over the transit. By September of 1944 the strike was over and blacks, motormen drove the trolleys. Before a year was up Chisum was murdered.

The headlines were explicit that a "woman trolley driver" struck and killed Melvin Chisum. Reports show that Chisum was hit so soundly that he never woke up in the hospital to tell what happened during his accident/murder. A push or a shove would have placed the seventy-two-year old, spy, provocateur, race man, and government agent in front of a train. The briefcase he carried was never recovered. He never woke up from his comatose state and died two days later. A very, very, quiet service for him was held with only family in attendance. While the family may be correct, that his death was indeed an accident; during that time, they did not know about his work as a spy and his missions he still carried out. They do not know what papers he had in the briefcase. Emmett Scott destroyed all paperwork that included Chisum. The question remains for historians to confront.

Melvin Chisum's life was a testament to the greatest American Black Spy career in America or world history. For historians who follow such a powerful dynamic career as his in politics, the underworld, and especially during the intense racial climate of he faced in his lifetime the idea that he was murdered is plausible because a biography is now written. It is not all encompassing but enough to show a life of an amazing, courageous, comedic, actor, investigator and loving father who considered himself an American Progressive. His name goes down in the American Civil Religion as the best American Black detective of the twentieth century. Circumstances in the world have changed and no man can ever take his place.

The dissertation ends with words from Melvin Chisum's son who sent this historian on a mission. Those that knew Melvin Chisum accepted his idiosyncrasies. Those who hated him, hated him. Those who loved him, loved him.

Knowing you has enabled me to understand my father better than I ever did. He and I bore the affection and respect toward each other that all good fathers and sons should. I never questioned why he was the way he was when I knew him. I was quite pleased with him, as I knew him. I was just past my 22nd birthday when I saw him last, while on furlough before going to the Pacific, in World War II. He must have written me at least every two weeks during the remainder of his life. Mail deliveries were irregular overseas, and when my outfit received its mail, there would always be several letters from Dad and probably a packet of newspapers as well. Had he been living and continued to live some years after my return, I may have learned some of these things about him myself. But I doubt the picture would have been as clear as you have painted it.¹¹¹

---Dr. Melvin Jackson Chisum Jr. to Author.

¹¹¹ Dr. Melvin Jackson Chisum, Jr. to Author September 18, 2014 in author's notebook. Dr. Chisum died October 22, 2014.

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