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Dismantling Isolation

A History of Oklahoma City's Deep Deuce

Historically, cities have always divided themselves. Whether it is a division of voting districts, neighborhoods, or even division by sports teams, cities across the world are divided. These divisions sometimes are natural boundaries such as rivers while others are the result of man-made boundaries such as railroad tracks. Also, divisions can even be created along invisible boundaries where one house is in one district while their neighbor is in another. In most cases, these divisions are used to define an area and create a sense of community. Sadly, though, these divisions have been abused for decades. During the expansion of cities throughout the United States, cities divided areas to segregate by race. De jure and de facto segregation left minorities with little support from either the government or city residents. Caucasian people were encouraged to build and develop on prime properties and left damaged, dangerous, and undesirable properties to minorities. Furthermore, during instances of gentrification, residents who had transformed less desirable land into meaningful neighborhoods were displaced. In spite of those in power trying to force them out of their homes, through the power of will and strong community bonds, some minority communities were able to build and create vibrant neighborhoods that allowed residents to thrive. But as cities continued to expand, some saw

these areas as detrimental to their personal agendas.

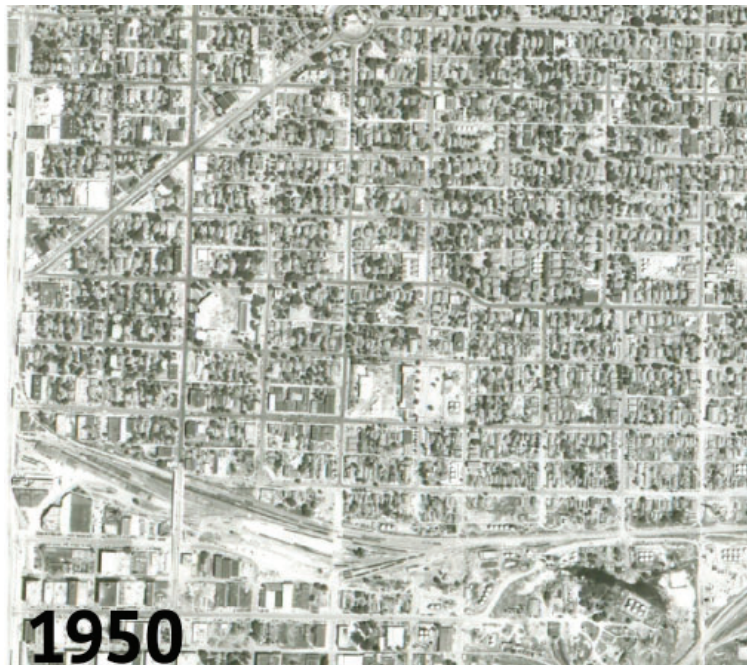
One example of where this happened is located just east of Oklahoma City's entertainment district known as Bricktown, in a neighborhood called Deep Deuce. This district was originally designated as the African American neighborhood during the decades of segregation and Jim Crow laws. Before this designation, the area was used to drill for oil. After all the wells went dry the area was left in ruins. It was scattered with the remains of old drilling equipment and had extremely poor soil conditions. Making the entire area just off downtown Oklahoma City wholly undesirable. When Oklahoma was admitted to the Union in 1907, the first laws passed through the senate were laws establishing racial segregation within the state. These laws established Deep Second, the area which would come to be known as Deep Deuce. The area consisted of the land south of 4th Street and East of the Santa Fe Railway. Centering itself around 2nd Street as a commercial

district, Deep Deuce took this near wasteland and grew a tight community where those within could be safe. Through the Great Depression and all the way through World War 2, Deep Deuce was able to build a dense urban core that included shops, restaurants, hotels, music halls, and theaters. This area was also home to two schools and churches on almost every block. Even with oppressive laws challenging every move that happened to this neighborhood, the residents were able to fight the injustices that were being forced upon them and build a strong community.

From within Deep Deuce rose several leaders that would change history. One notable individual that had a

significant impact on the community was Clara Luper. A teacher at Douglas High School, Ms. Luper played an important role in starting several high-profile sit-ins at establishments throughout Downtown Oklahoma City. These sit-ins were heard around the country and led to several others following suit. They had a major impact on the Civil Rights movement and helped to bring these oppressed communities out of their decades of suffering. In 1964 when the Civil Rights Act was passed, neighborhoods like Deep Deuce celebrated this historic victory but, little did they know, their fight had only just begun.

Once Civil Rights laws were created to protect people against segregation laws, racist politicians and private citizens began creating new ways to oppress. One of these methods was the strategic placement of new infrastructure and highway systems. City planners and national highway



developers sought to build new highways right through the middle of minority communities. Because of the previously mentioned segregation laws implemented in cities, many colored communities were located in areas of low property value. This allowed government officials and private agencies to easily purchase properties with little compensation to owners when planning the construction of highway systems. In instances of resistance from community members, eminent domain was abused in order to force people out of their community. This meant those in positions of power could single out minority communities when placing highways in order to reduce the cost and resistance which would have resulted from displacing other neighborhoods. This placement, however, typically divided the neighborhoods where people lived from their central commercial hubs. This is exactly what happened to Deep Deuce. In

1976 Interstate 235 was approved for construction, and when the first 3 miles were built, the highway cut off the eastern half of Deep Deuce, where most people lived, from the western half, where most of the commercial businesses were. This strategic isolation limited access to grocery stores, places of work, schools, and even churches. This led to an extreme drop in property value because of the proximity to the new highway. Ultimately, most of the remaining residents decided to leave the area and resettle in other neighborhoods around Oklahoma City, away from the major wall that is I-235. By the time the highway was officially opened in 1989, the eastern half of Deep



Deuce was nearly abandoned, and the western half was left in disrepair. Then in the early 2000s, when the western half of Deep Deuce was merely a giant parking lot for Downtown, new developments began west of the highway. This development saw the revitalization of Bricktown as a new entertainment district. Along with the forming of this new district, the western half of Deep Deuce was developed as a new housing district. Though this neighborhood reflects the style of Bricktown, it keeps the name Deep Deuce. This is the only reference to the area's past. These developments ignored the exciting and vibrant history that once flooded 2nd street and simply became large apartment complexes and multimillion-dollar townhomes. Though these developments have brought new life to western Deep Deuce, the east side is still left in the shadow of the highway.

Cities around the country have been divided. In our own backyard of Oklahoma City, we have divided parts of the city. This division was caused by a racially fueled highway that has now become a core transportation route that cannot simply be removed. Deep Deuce was just one neighborhood that faced the brunt of this division. This division isolated the people from their livelihoods, which in turn saw the fall of the community.

