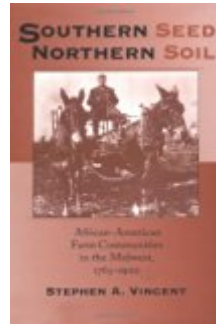


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Stephen A. Vincent. *Southern Seed, Northern Soil: African-American Farm Communities in the Midwest, 1765-1900*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. xvii + 224 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33577-7.

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## Meanwhile, Down on the Farm: African-American Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest

In 1909, when W.E.B. DuBois announced in his *Colored American Magazine* that “Throughout the United States there are numbers of communities of black folk, segregated, more or less autonomous, going their quiet way unknown of most of the surrounding world,” most of his readers were probably perplexed. The Great Migration had been the principle fact of African-American life in the Old Northwestern states (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) for decades, the often exclusive model upon which conceptions of Black life in the North were based. As DuBois went on to note, however, “there are in Ohio and Indiana perhaps a dozen such communities, romantic in history and rich in social lessons.” Though DuBois did not elaborate as to how the histories of these communities were “romantic” or precisely what “social lessons” they might provide, he was at least aware of their existence. Had he been writing fifty years earlier, he could have mentioned four or more times as many rural “colored” enclaves in the region.

Ironically, contemporary scholars of African-American history—usually so quick to pick up DuBois’s excellent leads—have ignored the existence of these communities, which dotted the length and breadth of the Old Northwest but which were concentrated in southern Ohio and southern and central Indiana. The largest—in Cass County, Michigan—was the subject of a deeply flawed (and flagrantly ahistorical) sociological study some years ago; more recently, in 1993, Xenia McCord published a much more useful overview of the Indiana settlements in an attempt to promote further historical

inquiry. Led by Coy Robbins, a number of local historians and genealogists have attempted since the early 1990s to excavate and publish records relating to rural African-American communities in Indiana. But Stephen Vincent’s book is the first extended scholarly treatment of any such community in the ninety-three years since DuBois first drew readers’ attentions to them. Meticulously researched, Vincent’s account at long last begins to fill a glaring lacuna in both African-American history and the story of the American Midwest more generally.

Vincent grew up near one such settlement—the Roberts Settlement in Hamilton County, Indiana—and began researching its history in his undergraduate days. His book—a substantially expanded revision of his Ph.D. dissertation—chronicles not only the Roberts Settlement but also its parent community, the so-called Beech Settlement of Rush County. “The Beech,” as it was known, was established in the late 1820s by “free people of color” from the border counties of eastern North Carolina and Virginia: mostly mixed-race families with some property and social stature, both of which they found to be under increasing attack during the 1820s and 1830s. The Roberts and Jeffries families were among hundreds that sought new homes in the Midwest during these years. Although some of these migrants came to Indiana as individuals or individual families, most—like the Robertses and Jeffrieses—resettled in clusters made up of extended kinship networks. They arrived in Indiana with enough money to buy land, which, they understood, was the key to their economic and social survival. At the peak of their

development and prosperity, circa 1870, the two communities included 86 families, hundreds of residents, schools and churches, and combined land ownership exceeding 4000 acres.

Vincent's discussion of the communities' histories from the frontier period through maturity and decline is drawn—especially in the early years—from disparate, fragmentary sources. His ability to contextualize the documented activities of community members (buying a particular farm, marrying a particular partner) makes up in large part for the lack of a richer evidential basis. He is particularly good at sorting through the myriad and often contradictory dynamics of the pioneer generation's relations with local white Quakers. Less convincing are his discussions of internal divisions within the communities, which he documents in terms of class, background, tenure, racial status, and religion but dismisses as “more than offset...by other factors which tended to encourage the development of a new, shared sense of community at each location” (p.67). Perhaps. What is sure is that the vicissitudes of the late nineteenth century—including subdivision of existing land holdings, escalating racial tension (including discriminatory legislation), financial panics and pressures on small-scale farming, the lure of the region's growing cities, and increased ties with African-Americans of other backgrounds and communities—steadily ate away at both settlements' insular success. Like most mixed-race and African-American communities in the rural American Midwest, both communities were shells of their former selves by 1900.

But they were not quite dead. One of the more intriguing aspects of the settlements' histories, as chronicled by Vincent, are the homecomings celebrations, which began at the Beech in 1904 and at the Roberts Settlement (where the decline was slower) in 1924. As Vincent notes, these homecomings were not only reunions and social events; they were also celebrations of the *ideal* the settlements had supposedly embodied, in terms of both prosperity and place. The homecomings—which continue to this day—amounted to annual, ongoing exercises in creating some kind of usable, relevant past. Like all such efforts, these exercises involved the promotion and embroidery of some aspects of the communities' histories, the elision or suppression of others. Vincent's discussion of these dynamics is tentative—occupying a dozen or so of the book's final pages—but evocative nevertheless, easily one of the most fascinating sections and a fine conclusion for the whole.

The most obvious value of Vincent's study is the con-

siderable light it sheds not only on the intertwined histories of the Roberts and Beech Settlements, but on the general phenomenon of nonwhite rural settlements in the Midwest. As Vincent notes, the families in both settlements were related to residents of many similar communities, and so his narrative at various points widens out to cover African-American and mixed-race peoples in the region more generally.

Vincent's book is also exemplary in its ability to synthesize “story”—that is, a readable narrative framework—from sparse sources. The Robertses, their kin and neighbors were middling people, the kind least visible in early American records. They did not leave diaries; their daily lives were not, for the most part, chronicled in local newspapers. Their ability to “blend in” with their surroundings, both in North Carolina and in Indiana, was often an important key to their very survival. In fact what sets the Roberts Settlement apart from so many others, for the professional historian, is the existence of a cache of letters written by community members dating back to the migrations of the late 1820s. The existence of these letters is a huge boost to Vincent, but they do serve to obscure somewhat the real achievement of this book, in terms of the historian's craft. Teasing out what we like to think of as “history” from obscure tax and court records, inferring motives and glossing recondite evidence—none of this is new to American social historians of the early 21st century. Seeing it done so well, however, remains an unusual treat.

The most complex question raised by Vincent's book, however, hovers at the margins of his story: the question of what it meant for mixed-race families of long standing in the Old South to remake their lives in Indiana as *African-Americans*. As Vincent notes in his introduction, by the second half of the nineteenth century inhabitants of the Roberts Settlement clearly identified as Black: young men enrolled for military service in the U.S. Colored Troops, and the principal church had affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, etc. In a few graceful paragraphs, however, Vincent acknowledges that their racial situation was actually much more complex:

The communities' members, along with their immediate forebears, were not easily classified according to the prevailing racial categories of their day. While they were an African-descended people and suffered the common disabilities facing all African Americans, they were also perceptibly different from the vast majority of other blacks.

For the most part the families that founded these communities had been free for generations, even for centuries, prior to the move to Indiana; many had no tradition of bondage whatsoever. As Vincent goes on to note, “their ancestry in many instances was decidedly multi-racial than predominately African. Some, in fact, had very little African ancestry at all.” Vincent is certainly right in noting—again, as early as his introduction—that despite this racial complexity, local whites “normally refused to accept them on anything approaching equal footing,” preferring to think of them as “colored” or “mulatto” which, as time went on, meant “Black.” “These descriptive labels shifted from place to place but, in keeping with the broader trends of American race relations, generally gave increasing emphasis over time to the African element in Beech and Roberts residents’ identity” (p. xvii).

But not always across the region, and not even always within these two particular settlements. As Vincent shows in his excellent gallery of photographs, community residents varied—in terms of appearance—from distinctly “African-American” to virtually white. Although they were “an African-descended people,” this did not necessarily make them “African-American,” in terms of their own identities or those white neighbors attempted to foist upon them. The Jeffries family, the principal landowning clan of the Beech Settlement, had a long tradition of Native American ancestry. Macklin Jeffries, one of the original Indiana immigrants, later moved from the Beech Settlement into neighboring Hancock County and closed his life as a respected “white” farmer; his cousins in Whitley County won their right to be legally classified as “Indian” in an 1869 decision of the Indiana Supreme

Court. To be a “mulatto” or a “free person of color” was not necessarily the same thing as being “Black.” As the two communities disintegrated, many former residents chose Macklin Jeffries’s path, passing as white in more distant locations. Others, however, chose to remain within African-American circles, where, by virtue of their relative affluence, their education, and quite possibly their light complexions, they often assumed positions of leadership and power. If the twin stories of the Roberts and Beech Settlements are remarkable in many ways, perhaps the most remarkable is the questions they raise about how “race” itself was manufactured over the course of the nineteenth century, both in rural Indiana and across the nation.

Vincent is alive to these implications, suggesting them at appropriate moments throughout the text but apparently reluctant to go much beyond the parameters of his particular sources, his particular story. As he seems to understand, this kind of nuanced discussion, however enlightening and necessary for a fuller understanding of race in American history, must await a more extensive accumulation of in-depth scholarship at the local level. Vincent’s meticulous research and thoughtful presentation is a substantial first step in that direction. Micro-history at its best, *Southern Seed, Northern Soil* should do away with any number of glib generalizations about the development of Midwestern and African-American life in the nineteenth century while advancing the broader discussion of race in American life. Highly recommended.

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