



Michigan's most diverse community proud of its past, present—and future

Covert Township (Van Buren Co.), located on the shores of Lake Michigan in southwest Michigan, isn't just any community.

For 151 years, it has been a land of racial hopes and dreams. Settled by whites and blacks just after the Civil War, it remains the most diverse community in Michigan, according to an analysis of census and demographic data.

The different races sat together in one-room schoolhouses in the early 1900s, danced together at sock hops in the 1950s, and were buried side by side at the end of the century, as attested by photos at the Covert Historical Museum.

"We've always looked out for each other," said **Barbara Rose**, a former supervisor who has lived in the township since 1952. "We've always come together whenever there's bad stuff."

While Detroit and other major Midwestern cities remain largely segregated today, Rose—a former MTA District 22 director—chuckled at the audacity of a town being integrated in the 1800s.

In the 1860s, blacks and whites had shared a bond: They were both newcomers working together to carve a community out of the Michigan wilderness, historians said.

The sprawling township has dense forest, blueberry farms, 2,800 people and five churches. The one-block downtown boasts a library built in 2010 and a public safety building that opened in April.

The population is 50 percent white, 24 percent black and 30 percent Hispanic, which doesn't include migrant workers, according to the 2010 Census.

Built on good intentions

Covert wasn't created as an abolitionist community, freed-black settlement or utopian social experiment, historians said. It was just a bunch of New England whites and former slaves who didn't mind the color of each other's skin and laid a foundation of trust in one another.

The whites had been influenced by the teachings of the Congregational Church, which stridently opposed slavery, said Anna-Lisa Cox, a fellow at Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African and African American Research.

She called their cooperation a quiet radicalism. “(Covert) was founded by a group of people who had good intentions and acted on them,” Cox said.

In 1866, these common folk joined together and quietly flaunted racial laws and customs. It was illegal for whites and blacks to attend school together so the township omitted the race of students when sending rolls to Lansing for state aid, Cox said.

It also was illegal for blacks to vote, but Michigan law didn’t say anything about being elected.

In 1868, the same year Michigan voters rejected the right of blacks to vote, Covert elected Dawson Pompey, a black farmer who was the son of a slave, to supervise the building of roads. By the end of the century, the township had elected 29 African-Americans as township trustees, constables, drain commissioners and election inspectors, and the first black justice of the peace in Michigan.

Betty Colombel, who is Pompey’s great-great-granddaughter, taught at Covert public schools and continues to live in the township today.

“We accept everybody and anybody,” Colombel said. “That’s just the way things were, and they never changed.”

All of this had been lost to history until Cox wrote about it in her 2006 book, “A Stronger Kinship: One Town’s Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith.” Before that, Covert had been covert.

Cox began to research the township because she heard it had been part of the Underground Railroad. It wasn’t a part of the slave route, she learned, but it turned out to be something even better.

Cox’s book drew attention to the township’s proud, progressive past—helping to put the township in the national spotlight. Last year, Covert earned a display in the Smithsonian Institution’s “Making a Way Out of No Way” Community Galleries, which focus on strategies black Americans used over the years to overcome slavery and racism and to ultimately succeed.

The township earned a display in the galleries because of its long history of integration. Included in the display were items donated by the township historical museum, including school books from the late 1800s, old panoramic photos of Covert school classes, and a globe from the first schoolhouse.

Undergoing another transformation

Now Covert is undergoing another cultural transformation.

The region, dubbed Michigan’s Fruit Basket, produces everything from pears to peaches, apples to apricots. It has long drawn migrant workers who left after several months, residents said. But, for the past decade, immigrants from Chicago have come and planted roots.

Many immigrants had grown up in rural parts of Mexico. They said they never liked the hustle and bustle of the city. Covert feels a lot like home. “It’s like a mecca,” said resident Ernesto Villegas, who moved with his wife and daughter from the Windy City and opened a restaurant downtown. “It’s the first time in my life where I felt like I could do anything,” he said.



Covert Township (Van Buren Co.) is the most diverse community in Michigan, according to an analysis of census and demographic data. Settled by blacks and whites after the Civil War, the different races sat together in one-room schoolhouses in the early 1900s, danced together at sock hops in the 1950s, and were buried side by side at the end of the century.

If the downtown museum tells the stories of white and black settlers, the businesses around it tell the tale of the newest arrivals. Sweet Harvest Café is now Ernie’s, owned by Villegas. Sarno’s Farm produce is now Arellano’s Fresh Fruit Market. The jazz that once flowed from J and L Soul Food Kitchen has been replaced by a television tuned to a Spanish-speaking show in La Racherita grocery store.

When Hispanics began to move into Covert in larger numbers in the early 2000s, tempered flared at the high school. Relations between students have smoothed out as they got used to each other.

As for their parents, there never was a problem. The newbies said they have been warmly welcomed by the community. Strangers frequently wave hello.

Maria Gallegos was elected to the school board in 2014 and became president last year. Gallegos, who was born in Chicago, began visiting Covert after her mom bought a blueberry farm there in 2004. She moved to Covert for good five years later after meeting her future husband on a blind date. “I like everything,” Gallegos said.

Proud of what their community represents

The old-timers said the arrival of a new group in Covert is no big deal. They didn’t have to get used to living among people of a different color, they said. They’ve been doing it their entire lives.

While they downplay their reaction, the descendants of the original settlers are proud of what their community represents.

“Nobody cares if someone is black or white or Hispanic,” said Jean Robinson, who was born in Covert and is secretary of the historical museum board. “We don’t look at color.”

Portions of this article were excerpted and reprinted with permission from the *Detroit News*, authored by Francis Donnelly and published on Sept. 18, 2017. Visit www.detroitnews.com (search for “Francis Donnelly”) to read the full article.