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## Influence of the Present Economic Changes on Commercialized Recreation Among Negroes in Houston, Texas

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INFLUENCE OF THE PRESENT ECONOMIC  
CHANGES ON COMMERCIALIZED RECREA-  
TION AMONG NEGROES IN HOUSTON, TEXAS

by

Chaucer L. Robinson

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted  
to the Faculty of the School of  
Arts and Sciences

of

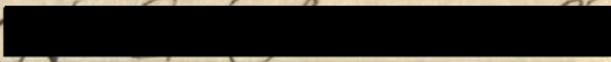
PRAIRIE VIEW STATE COLLEGE

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and  
Accepted on the Recommendation of

  
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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of Study: For a long time there has been certain hypothesis held against the Negro that the writer has often wondered whether they are really true or whether they are drawn up by watching the social characteristics of only a limited number of Negroes. For instance it is said that Negroes are born criminals, but on the other hand there have been studies made proving that Negroes are no more born criminals than any other race.

It is held that the Negro will diminish necessities of his family budget in order to enjoy the regular amount of amusement in the midst of the present economic changes. It is not the purpose of this study to prove the above statement, to be true, but it is the purpose to find and show the extent to which Negroes in Houston give support to commercialized recreation in the midst of the present economic condition.

Scope: The locality over which this study was made is Houston, Texas. Thinking in terms of the Negro as to social status and the facilities for at-

Continued  
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Introduction

Scope

tending dominant kinds of commercialized recreation, the writer is sure Houston is one of the most efficient cities in Texas to furnish the study with material. Houston is most efficient, because it has the largest population of Negroes among the Texas cities; it has more notable commercialized recreational facilities than any other of the Texas cities, and then the Negroes of Houston are distinctly divided into upper and lower classes.

Limitation of Material: First in collecting material to point out some obvious economic changes, many periodicals and newspapers were read. Surveys and personal interviews were used to collect data concerning the situation of the problem in Houston, Texas. The information was collected from individuals who are directly connected with some form of commercialized recreation to the extent that they can give facts and figures about the business. In the phase of the study treating the status of the economic changes, periodicals and newspapers were consulted. On theatres, Mr. Henry N. Brown, reporter and commercialized artist for the Lincoln Theatre in Houston, Texas

Continued  
Chapter I  
Introduction

Limitation of Material

gave all the information. Mr. George Peek, the proprietor of two billiard rooms added information concerning the billiard room business. On commercialized dances, Mr. Samuel Snell, the dance promoter, was interviewed by the writer. Dr. E. B. Evans, president of the Southwestern Colored Athletic Association had sufficient material on collegiate football. Baseball data was secured through mail, from Mr. Fred N. Ankenman, president of the Baseball Association in Houston, Texas.

Public recreation is that recreation that is supported by the state and city; it is rendered free to all citizens, children and adults. Commercial recreation is that recreation which exacts a fee from every individual attending or participating.

Some organized scheme for the purpose of supplying a program for the leisure time activity of both children and adults has become a vital part of

Continued  
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Introduction

Limitation of Material

the concern of workers everywhere; as well as those public-spirited citizens who are interested in character building.

The recreational needs of Negroes in Houston are emphasized by the congested conditions under which most of them live. This is especially true of those who live in rented quarters. The housing quarters are small and constructed in close proximity of each other. They are situated for the most part on unpaved streets and narrow alleys.<sup>1</sup>

Public recreation: There are ten year round playgrounds operated by the Recreational Department, one of which is for colored people. There are twenty-five summer playgrounds, four of which are for colored. Five school pools operated during the summer with one for colored. The white population of Houston is 3.1 larger than the Negro population. The public recreational facilities are on the average ten to one in favor of the white population.

1. Thomas, Jesse O. "Recreation and Amusement". The Social Welfare Status of Negroes in Houston, Texas, 92, (May, 1929).



The Status of the Present Economic Changes in Houston among Negroes: To treat the general subject effectively, it is absolutely necessary to get a statistical background of the economic conditions among Negroes in Houston.

In 1929 economic changes came to pass that called out the attention of the entire world. After a vast number of industries were closed down, the problem of unemployment arose. In checking on the principal powers in the world, the following table will show the distribution of the unemployment situation:

TABLE I. Distribution of Unemployment in 1930

Countries	Number of Unemployed
United States	5,000,000
Germany	2,347,000
Great Britain	1,694,000
Soviet Russia	1,235,000
Italy	385,000
Japan	300,000
Poland	289,000
	<hr/>
Total	11,250,000

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With the exception of France and some relatively unimportant industrial or agricultural countries, the world today faces a very difficult situation.

James Tri<sup>u</sup>slow Adams says, "We can't go forever, speeding up industrial processes and inventing new labor-saving devices that throw more and more people out of work, without creating what I referred to as a problem of progressive unemployment!"<sup>1</sup>

A year later and the problem of economic changes are growing more critical and more complex. In the three leading industrial countries of the world -- United States, Great Britain and Germany -- nine million workers stand idle. There is scarcely an important industry anywhere earning enough profit to make it expand, which is the test of progress.

Economic experts were called in question, theories were drawn up and experiments were tried. Neither the restriction of output nor the reduction of wages serves in itself to restore equilibrium. Workers are unemployed because industrialists do not expect to be able to sell without loss what would be produced if they were employed, and that is because prices have fallen lower than cost of production.

1. Fabian, Franklin. "The Scepter of Overproduction".  
Forum V LXXIV, PP 367 - 370. December, 1930.

To bring the depression nearer to the purpose of the treatise, the conditions of the Negro in this vicinity should be considered. According to the State Department of Labor, an estimate of 291,000 are unemployed in Texas. According to the Houston Post-Dispatch over a million people are affected by the idleness of these wage earners and the purchasing power of 15 per cent of the population has been destroyed. A national survey made shows that 50 per cent of the unemployed male were Negroes and 75 per cent of the females were Negroes, and the Negro race only represents about one-twelfth of the total population.<sup>1</sup>

A shock to the Negro business of Houston is the receivership of the Ancient Order of Pilgrims. It was not able to withstand the financial storm. The Pilgrims had stood as a financial institution for 49 years.

Many jobs have been closed in the face of the Negro. Some replaced the Negro with white help, while other industries were not able to operate longer without loss. Jobs as oil mill compresses; Southern Pacific Railroad Shop; jobs as maids, waiters, bell hops, truck

1. Negro Labor News, Houston, Texas, November 21, 1931.

drivers are being given over to whites.

Mr. C. W. Rice, President and general manager of the Texas Negro Business and Laboring Men's Association, thinks the only lasting and conclusive solution to the whole problem is employment--steady and uninterrupted work for the six and one half million American citizens who won't to work and can't.

## ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

The number of Theatres for Negroes: Houston contains four theatres, for Negro attendance exclusively. Three of them are under white management, one is under the management of Negroes. They are classified as "ward" and "uptown" theatres. The "uptown" theatre is owned and managed by a Negro. The ward theatres are among the lower strata of theatres. They solicit the cheapest productions, which usually are Wild West and serial pictures. The "uptown" theatre solicits those pictures among the best productions. The "uptown" theatre has a seating capacity of 600 persons. When additional seating capacity is necessary, it is done by the use of movable chairs. The attendance of the theatre has been held constant by means of extra attractions. A double programme is offered every Wednesday and Thursday. Talkies were installed two months after white theatres received them. Every Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, there is a special matinee offered, fixing prices at ten cents for children and twenty cents for adults. The largest crowd attends on Saturday, Sunday and Monday. The greatest per cent of the crowd are school children on Monday. The regular prices are children under 12 years of age--admission ten cents. Children over 12 years of age--admission fifteen cents, and adults twenty-five cents.

The theatre is opened for business on Sundays from one o'clock P.M. until eleven o'clock P. M. It is open on week days from eleven o'clock A. M. until eleven o'clock P. M. On Sunday the programme is shown over five times and on week days six times.

On Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday, the Lincoln Theatre is almost assured of a full house all the afternoon.

In 1930 there were four billiard rooms in Houston for Negroes. Two were operated by a Greek. The two operated by Negroes became extinct at the close of the year of 1930. No data could be secured as to the reason why they went out of business. But from my observation, the billiard room business of Houston was not enough to support four billiard rooms.

In 1932 a Greek by the name of George Peek was the only billiard room operator for Negroes in Houston, Texas. The two billiard rooms are located on Milam Street near Prairie Avenue. This is in the center of the Negro business section of the city. It is on the West side of what is called the uptown business district.

From the result of an interview with Mr. Peek and a survey of his billiard rooms, the writer offers these findings for consideration. In the billiard room on the main floor there are eight active billiard tables. In the billiard room on the second floor there are twelve active billiard tables. The operator collects a fee of five cents

for each game played.

Mr. Peek has been in this type of business for nine years. His belief at the time of interview was that business was a little better now than ever before, due to the fact that many are unemployed, and the billiard rooms have become a hang out for the unemployed. He holds that men who have no jobs spend most of their time in the billiard rooms, for the purpose of light gambling. Business is not increasing for the sole purpose of recreation, but for the purpose of winning room rent, meals and etc. In making further investigation into the business side of the enterprise, Mr. Peek refused to give figures to prove his point of view.

The major game played in the billiard rooms is pool. The writer played several games of pool, and stood by different hours in three or four days observing the general operation. From observations it could be noted that billiard rooms are open 14 hours per day. The average amount of games played on one table per hour are 4. The average amount of games played on one table per day are 56. The fee paid to the house man per game is five cents. This being approximately true, the receipts per month in the billiard room of 8 tables would be approximately \$627.20. The receipts for the billiard room of twelve tables would be approximately \$940.80.

There is another outstanding change in the billiard business. In 1930 the fee for per game was ten cents, now in 1932 it is reduced to five cents. Mr. Peek held that this particular change was due to economical changes. The billiard rooms never slump due to weather, or any other natural phenomena, for day in and day out the billiard rooms are filled with the regular attendance.

The figures above are not wholly scientific, but they were drawn from my keenest judgement in calculation and observation; they are approximately true under normal conditions.

In speaking of dances, it would be needless to think of treating the subject with its background in Houston, Texas unless some type of information could be obtained from Mr. Samuel Snell, the leading dance promoter in Houston, Texas.

Mr. Snell had records of the dances promoted by himself from 1927 to 1932. In drawing the comparison in figures, the 1928 and 1931 records were considered.

No. 1. Table showing distribution of dances promoted in 1928 and 1931 by Mr. Snell:

Months	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	total
No. of dances for year of 1928	3	2	3	4	3	6	6	3	5	3	6	7	51
No. of dances for year of 1931	4	2	1	2	2	4	5	2	5	3	6	7	43



In 1928 Mr. Snell promoted 51 dances. In 1931 Mr. Snell promoted 43 dances. He holds that the decrease in number between 1928 and 1931 was due to growing competition. In 1928 Mr. Snell was the only individual in the city (Negro) who promoted dances for a vocation. In 1931 competition came about through another man, who took up dance promotion as a vocation. Besides that several other men promoted dances now and then for the purpose of small speculations.

The average number of attendance at the dances of which he had no accurate tabulation, is between 250 to 300 persons. It never dropped under 200 persons unless the weather was very unfavorable. Rain is the major factor in unfavorable weather conditions for dances.

These dances are known as public dances. The standard admission is fifty cents a person and one dollar per couple. The advertisement is conducted in this manner: Slides are run on the screen in the local theatre. Placards are printed and posted in all Negro business or public places and on the street tacked to telephone posts throughout the city. At the close of one dance the next dance with orchestra is always announced in the dance hall.

The auditorium of the Pilgrim Temple on West Dallas Street, is the best place for giving dances. To have ample dancing space the auditorium will not accommodate over 350 or 375 persons.

Dances are supported by what is known as the sporting class of people. Economic conditions have not made any change in the dance business. The changes that are made are due to competition. Competition is due to others seeing the economic advantage in promoting dances, and trying the vocation.

A Chicago orchestra, ranking among the best colored orchestras in the United States played for a dance two nights straight at the convention hall. The orchestra drew a crowd of over two thousand persons each night. The general admission was seventy-five cents. The crowd was mixed with colored and white.

Commercialized Athletic Games: The writer made a study of Negro attendance at white baseball games. Athletics are outstanding in the field of commercialized recreation. There seem to be a common interest of both white and colored in the different athletic teams representing the city of Houston. The major sports are baseball and football. The Negroes turned out in large numbers to see white games and root hard for them to win. The white people show the very same attitude toward Negro games.

The 1931 season of baseball was the best season the Houston white team has ever had in the history of the team from an attendance standpoint. The rise in attendance was due to night baseball games, making it possible for day workers to go, and was due to what was known as "ladies night". On ladies night the ladies along with men companions were admitted free.<sup>1</sup>

Negroes attended the games as frequently as whites, due to the impartial spirit shown on the part of baseball promoters in regard to seating capacity. Negro fans were always appreciated. The large attendance of both colored and white was largely due to the good ball club in Houston last season. The attendance of both colored, and white is expected to fall off in 1932, due to the present economic conditions.

Football games: Beyond a doubt there are thousands of dollars spent for football games every year. Football is a game that carries the spirit, and draws the crowd wet and dry or cold and hot weather. A peculiar characteristic about football and very much different from baseball, it is not popular as a professional sport. The school spirit along with the game make them carry the largest attendance.

In studying the Negro attendance to football, the Prairie View State College annual classics on New Year's day was studied. The authority on the football situation, thinks that Houston is the best town or city for promoting football games. He has promoted games in three leading Texas cities namely: Houston, Dallas and Beaumont.

No. 1 The distribution of attendance in Houston to Prairie View's Annual Classics:

TEAMS	Year	Day	Paid Attendance	Paid Attendance Plus Complimentary
Alabama State Vs Prairie View.....	1932	Jan.1	2,697	3,050
Tuskegee Inst. Vs. Prairie View.....	1931	Jan.1	4,035	4,235
Fisk University Vs. Prairie View.....	1930	Jan.1	3,800	4,000
Atlanta University Vs. Prairie View.....	1929	Jan.1	4,500	4,800
TOTAL			15,032	16,085

It is noticed that the attendance of 1932 was lowest. The attendance of 1929 is highest, yet Dr. Evans holds that according to other reasons than dollars and cents, the 1931 game was the best drawing card. The attendance is always mixed with colored and white fans. In 1929 the business had no competition, but in the following three years, there was another annual high school intersectional football classic held on the same date by the white people. This caused a split in the attendance to some degree. In the second place this was the first football competition of that kind in Houston, Texas by Negro teams.

The Prairie View-Tuskegee game in 1931 was the best drawing card for the following reasons: First, Tuskegee Institute held the national championship; Second, Tuskegee Institute had a large alumni in Houston and vicinity, and third, through other football competition on that same date, the 1931 game drew a crowd of 4,035 to be compared with a crowd of 4,500 at the 1929 game.

The Alabama State game in 1932 fell behind the rest in attendance. It was not due to economic conditions, but largely due to the ability of the team to draw a crowd. In the first place, Alabama State was not in the

running for any honoers; in the second place, Alabama State had only one alumnus nearby to attend the game.

It is the contention of Dr. Evans that shrinkage in attendance was not due to economic changes, but due to the drawing merits of the teams. This is seen through the fact that Prairie View has played Wiley College in Dallas, Texas at the State Fair for three consecutive years 1930-1931-1932, and the 1932 game drew a crowd of one person above any of the other two games.

## CHAPTER III

## Interpretation of the Problem

Nature of the Negro toward Commercialized

recreation: Illustration In the summer of 1931, there were two Junior College men, spending their vacation in Houston, Texas. They were very good friends. Both were seeking jobs to help themselves go back to school the following session. Jobs were very scarce, in fact the men could not find steady work, but they did work occasionally. The young men were very fond of going to the theatre, and standing around on the street corners when they were not working. For a college man to hang out on the popular street corners, it was always necessary to be clean and neatly dressed. Their income from the irregular work was just barely enough to feed them, keep up the laundry bill and theatre fare. Then the income was large enough to cut down on the laundry bill and theatre going and spend the dividend buying little accessories that would go to help fill out their wardrobes for school the following session. Instead of cutting down the young men would see to their laundry bill being regular, so they could stand around on the streets and they would see to theatre fare being reserved, so they could see every picture each week.

Business men say, you can sell the world pleasure when they won't buy anything else. The Negro from the bottom of slavery is said to be easily satisfied, cheerful and docile

The Negro does not sacrifice his pleasure, but he sacrifices for his pleasure. Pleasure and recreation now are usually found in a commercialized form.

The effect of the economic changes on Commercialized Recreation: In general commercialized recreation has been affected very little. It has been affected in that, there are those who don't have anything to sacrifice for pleasure, after losing their jobs. It has been affected in that business entrepreneurs had to study additional schemes to make some people sacrifice. It has been affected in that cost of pleasure was forced to be cut along with wages.

Dances, from this study have been affected only by the few who are not able to sacrifice anything.

Billiard rooms have been affected by slash in prices, but an increase in attendance is found. Theatres have been affected only by the enterpriser having to make additional attractions to hold steady the attendance, and a slash in admission fees.

Baseball and football business have been altered very little. Baseball business saw a little advance, due to bargain schemes and the night system of playing. Football business remains almost constant with the ability of the drawing card.



## CHAPTER IV

## TREATMENT AND SUMMARY

Speaking of the influence of present economic changes on commercialized recreation, findings show that theatre business holds its attendance through business schemes and manipulations. Billiard rooms maintain their attendance through the slash in prices and a speculative force on the part of the public, especially the unemployed. Dances maintain their attendance through attractive advertisements. Baseball holds its attendance through shrewd business administration and administrators. Football business holds constant through the college spirit, which draws its portion of the crowd under any condition.

As has been said before, the Negro will not sacrifice pleasure but will sacrifice for pleasure. I will venture to say, that the Negro will sacrifice a portion of the necessities of livelihood, which are food, clothing and shelter to meet the demands of commercialized recreation, irrespective to the economic changes.

In treating the present conditions immediately, persistent effort should be made to secure larger park space with swimming pools, both house~~s~~, wading pools; at least ~~least~~ four wading pools and a professionally trained director of recreational activities, employed by the city, under whose

supervision a community-wide educational program would  
be constructed.

APPENDIX A

Letter received from Mr. Fred N. Ankenman,  
president of the Houston Baseball Association.

Dear Sir:

We have always enjoyed a very splendid support from the colored fans of Houston and vicinity at all our games in fact I am sure the support here is much better than any city in the Texas League. One reason is that we have provided at Buffalo Stadium plenty of good comfortable seats in the grandstand and the colored bleacher seats are exactly the same as to location as the white bleacher seats; except that one is on one side of the field and one on the other. Last year when the depression was on, we found attendance at our games better than ever, brought about to some extent by the fact that we played most all games at night and had a good ball club. There was no difference between the white and colored fans on percentage in this respect. On ladies night, we admitted both colored and white ladies free and we could hardly take care of the crowds on some nights. We are unable to say what the situation will be the coming season; although we do expect some falling off in attendance both of the white and colored in 1932 due to present conditions.

Very truly yours,

Signed: Fred N. Ankenman

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