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## Cairo: A Native's Perspective

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CAIRO: A NATIVE'S PERSPECTIVE

By  
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BA, Southern Illinois University, 2013

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the  
Master of Science

College of Mass Communication  
in the Graduate School  
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May 2015

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

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in the field of Mass Communication and Media Arts

Approved by:

William Lawrence, Chair

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Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
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Oftentimes, in life, we realize that certain things which are dear to us are not perceived in such a likable manner by others. One great example is my hometown, Cairo, Illinois. To expound on this, I am from a small Southern Illinois town which has a very negative past yet, it also has some very positive history and redeeming qualities as well. Unfortunately, Cairo is often linked to the social unrest of the 1960's and 1970's and as a result, is viewed negatively. That Cairo is a strong community fortified by love and concern for others is rarely, if ever, portrayed by outside coverage. As such, I have chosen to produce a documentary on this erroneously labeled and misunderstood town.

There have been several pieces produced about Cairo throughout the years, but none, in my opinion, shed a true light on this once thriving city. A few of the works created about the town are a feature-length documentary, *Between Two Rivers* (2012), and a photo documentary by Southern Illinois University's School of Mass Communication and Media Arts entitled, *The Cairo Project* (2007). Importantly, both of these projects fall short of capturing a native's perspective. From what I have observed, works produced about Cairo tend to mostly focus on the negative aspects of its history. None ever provide the complete point of view of the people who choose to live there. Of course, this is not an assertion that the projects intentionally misrepresent Cairo. Rather, as filmmakers from the outside, they face limitations because it is often very difficult to obtain true depictions of natives. As a result, interviewees are generally less forthcoming about the town's most intimate details and certain issues or questions are never addressed or asked. What distinguishes me from the aforementioned filmmakers is that I grew up in Cairo and I know all of the interviewees in my film either directly or indirectly. In addition, I have the same perspective of these individuals. That is, I know that Cairo is much more than a

troubled town devoid of significant economic industry. Furthermore, we share a connection that encourages them to speak freely about Cairo and their experiences living there.

I am proposing a documentary produced and directed by a Cairo native. A piece about this historical river city created by one of its natives will provide audiences with a unique glimpse into the town. By creating this film I intend to provide perspectives which other films have not. In addition, a film such as this will be valuable for historical purposes for the state of Illinois and the U.S., more broadly. Specifically, this film will provide real life accounts from individuals who lived during or participated in the Civil Rights Movement in Cairo in one of its most critical times, the late 1960's and early 1970's.

*Cairo: A Native's Perspective*, is centered on the southernmost city in Illinois. In this documentary I will address the history, current conditions, and sentiments of its inhabitants. Cairo has been portrayed as one of the worst towns in the country that anyone could visit. However, for many individuals, including me, this once booming river city is home. Thus, our perspectives of this small, now seemingly ghost town, are often different from those conveyed and perpetuated by outsiders, particularly the media. Without question, this city has experienced problems, but in large part, due to distorted media coverage, the positive aspects of this town are often overlooked. From its strong Black community that emerged mainly from runaway slaves to the famous individuals who were born or reside there, and even its general population, Cairo has many great attributes that are rarely, if ever discussed. As such, with this film, I intend to shed a different and more accurate light on this city.

## History

Cairo, Illinois is the southernmost city in the State of Illinois. This river city sits on the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Cairo's initial conception happened around 1818 before Illinois became a state. Further authorization occurred around the 1820's in Kaskaskia, home of Illinois' first state capital. Cairo was established on 800 acres of land granted by the state. However, due to the city's low proximity to the river, the initial settlements were plagued by constant flooding. Cairo did not become an extremely viable location until around the 1830's when the steamboat epoch was prevalent. River cities were largely popular during this time, but for cities such as Cairo, railroads were necessary for it to become fully practicable as a successful port (Hanson, "The Decline of Cairo, Illinois: A History and Analysis", 6; Cairo, "LegendsofAmerica.com").

Several years later financier, Darius B. Holbrook and other capitalists built another settlement of Cairo on higher ground due to consistent flooding. Several houses, docks, warehouses, and a saloon were established as a part of this venture. But once again, it failed due to persistent flooding and bad business practices which forced the investors to default on their loan agreements. In 1846 another group of businessman, once again, led by Holbrook purchased the property formerly owned by the previous group of investors, the Cairo City and Canal Company. In this venture, Holbrook experienced better luck in large part due to the Illinois Central Railroad extending the railroad and building levees around the town for transportation. As a result, Cairo became a lucrative river city and people began to migrate there during that time. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Cairo flourished and became an integral railroad and river metropolis. At its height in the early 1920's, Cairo boasted a population of approximately 15,000 residents. (Cairo, "LegendsofAmerica.com").

The Ohio and Mississippi rivers made Cairo a somewhat prosperous town as the rivers, the Civil War, and the railroads provided large amounts of revenue for the city. Because of its location between two rivers and the railroads, Cairo also became an important point for the Union Army. It's ideal location facilitated Union efforts to control strategic points along the rivers. As such, when General Ulysses S. Grant arrived in Cairo in 1861 he immediately captured neighboring city, Paducah, Kentucky and won a series of battles down the Mississippi and Tennessee's Cumberland river. These battles were mostly initiated from Fort Defiance in Cairo (Cairo, "LegendsofAmerica.com").

The Civil War did not just bring troops to Cairo, but citizens as well. Cairo's population tripled in three years due to the war. For example, in 1860 Cairo's population was 2,000, a number that by 1862 quickly rose to 6,000 (Hanson, 6). In addition to experiencing a growth in population due to the war, there were also about 12,000 Union soldiers stationed at Cairo's Fort Defiance. Thus, Cairo was a booming town during this time with prosperity on the horizon.

In conjunction with having a relatively large population of White Union soldiers and citizens, Cairo also had a large population of African Americans as well. This unusually large population of Blacks was mostly due to the contraband camp. Contraband was the name given to runaway slaves during this time so when camps were set up to house them the term contraband camp was derived. Cairo was the location of one of the largest contraband camps during the Civil War. To provide an example of the size of this camp, Cairo's initial African American population of approximately 3,000 came from this camp. It was estimated that Cairo housed about 9,000 runaway slaves prior to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Nevertheless, the majority of the runaway slaves held there returned to the South. This established the significance of the camp. One author writes, "Although the contraband camp was soon disbanded and much

of its African American population returned to the South, more than three thousand blacks decided to remain in Cairo.” (Hays, “The African American Struggle for Equality and Justice in Cairo, Illinois, 1865-1900”. 256).

Whites and Blacks flourished in post-Civil War Cairo. A strong Black community was established which was fortified by the formation of Black schools, churches and businesses. In 1903, the Cairo Standard Publishing Company published African American writer, A.E. Patterson’s book, *The Possibilities of the Negro* (Patterson, “The Possibilities of the Negro”). This text highlights some of the prominent Blacks in Cairo and the surrounding area. Businessmen, school teachers, policemen and the like were all highlighted in the book providing examples of how a number of African Americans were able to flourish in Cairo. However, Cairo and much of the surrounding area still strongly restricted Blacks particularly in employment. I can account to this first hand because my mother and father spoke vehemently and frequently about how oftentimes, especially during the winter, their fathers had to leave town to find work to provide for their families. This feeling of despair and inequality came to a head during the late 1960’s in the form of protests and boycotts in this faltering river city. As a result, violence ensued for months in the form of shootings and burnings in Cairo between the African Americans and Whites. Surprisingly, no riots occurred and few people were hurt during this time, only marches protest and boycotts.

The Black community was led by the head of the United Front in Cairo, Reverend Charles Koen, and the white community, which was mostly represented by the White Hats, was headed by then mayor of Cairo, Lee Stenzel. The United Front is a Christian, slightly socialist organization dedicated to empowering the Black community. The White Hats was a militia group, initially called the Committee of Ten Million, and created by Peyton Burling, former



Alexander County States Attorney. It was supposedly established to protect the community however, many was terrorized by them especially, African Americans. This social unrest lasted in Cairo until the early 1970's. Although African Americans fought hard for equality, by the time the violence and social unrest came to an end, they had made very little progress.

(Cairo, "LegendsofAmerica.com"; Ewing, "Personal Interview").

Importantly, violence in Cairo, Illinois is not exclusive to race; rather, it is inclusive to all. Specifically, both Whites and Blacks were lynched in Cairo. One such instance occurred on November 11, 1909 when Henry Salzner, a white photographer accused of killing his wife, was lynched by a blood thirsty mob. This murder occurred directly after the lynching of a Black man. The blood lusting vigilante mob demanded their own kind of justice that night and obtained it (McDermott, "An Outrageous Proceeding: A Northern Lynching and the Enforcement of Anti-Lynching Legislation in Illinois, 1905-1910", 67).

The unbiased violence in Cairo did not just take the form of lynch mobs, but the Mob literally, as in organized crime. Bootlegging was big business for mobsters living in Cairo during the late 1940's and early 50's. Mobsters would bootleg alcohol to the surrounding dry counties. In addition to bootlegging, slot machines were also lucrative for the Mob. Cairo mobsters waged a war over territory during that time killing and murdering many of their own in the process. My mother once told me a story which attests to the Mob violence that occurred in Cairo. Her friend was working at a local restaurant/nightclub where the owner, a local car dealer and mobster, Jake Rubin, was violently killed. My mother was not there during the time of the shooting, but her dear friend was and told her that the owner asked her to guard a briefcase full of money shortly before he was murdered. This church going lady was terrified and told that story vividly many times until she passed. Although, this is a frightful account of an actual occurrence, this is not

unusual for many cities during this time. Cairo, Illinois has a very colorful history that is far more complex than the racial problems it is known for (Hughes, "Personal Interview").

### Conclusion

Cairo, Illinois, the gateway to the South, has a lot of good and bad history. Thus, a documentary depicting the historical river city's past more accurately is extremely important. As a Cairo native, with the help of longtime Cairo residents in conjunction with my perspective, I can bring attention to untold histories that other filmmakers have yet to recount. My documentary will be an important contribution to Illinois and United States History. A formal film proposal is attached to this document describing some of the content of scenes already filmed.

### Action Sequence

One sequence in the film will include William Eason. Eason is an African American museum curator and former educator. His accounts of Cairo and the surrounding area's history will shed light on misconceptions about the town and expose contributors to its downfall and negative stigma. Other sequences will include Judson Childs, former mayor, Percy Jones, a prominent Black businessman, Clydia Koen, wife of Civil Rights Activist, Charles Koen, and Clarence Dossie, a former Civil Rights Activist. The majority of sequences are interviews of individuals discussing topics relevant to them and Cairo.

The film starts with a montage displaying the inhabitants of Cairo. This sequence shows people working on the river, driving through the downtown area, in their neighborhoods, etc. This footage was filmed to depict Cairo just as any other small town in the United States.

Next, is the sequence of a prominent local African American business man, Percy Jones. This sequence displays Jones talking about his experience of having businesses in Cairo for over 30 years. Footage of Jones is shot while he is at his most current establishment.

The last two sequences are Clydia Koen, wife of Civil Rights Activist, Charles Koen and Judson Childs, former mayor. These scenes truthfully depict the individuals in their environment and shed further illuminate the present and future of this town.

### Main Characters

There are four main characters in the film. They are Judson Childs, former mayor of Cairo, William “Willie” Eason, a local African American museum curator and former educator, Clydia Koen, wife of famous Civil Rights Activist, Charles Koen, and Gary Whitfield, a concerned citizen. These individuals’ roles in the film will help to explain Cairo’s historical and present state.

Judson Child- Former mayor of Cairo and retired corrections officer

William “Willie” Eason- African American museum curator and former educator

Clydia Koen- Cairo Resident and wife of famous Civil Rights Activist Charles Koen

Clarence Dossie- Former Civil Rights Activists

Brandon Lowe- Rapper and Cairo resident

Percy Jones- Local Black business owner

William Eason- Museum curator and former educator

Gary Whitfield- Father and concerned Cairo resident

### Conflict

Each character has a conflict. For example, Brandon is a young African American man trying to survive in a dwindling Mid-West town and Judson Childs’ is dealing with community issues in

Cairo. Collectively, they are all coping with living in a city whose better days are long gone and very little promise is seen for the future. These are just a couple of conflicts but all of the individual's struggles will become more apparent as the film develops.

#### To-Camera Interviews

Judson Childs is the former mayor of Cairo, Illinois. Childs is now retired, however, being a Cairo resident, he is still faced with issues in the community, particularly, the economy. In my interview with Childs, I will establish the many positive stories of Cairo and also address some past and present issues. This is also what I will attempt with the majority of interviews. In addition to those interviews there will also be some from Percy Jones, a prominent African American businessman, Gary Whitfield, a concerned resident, and Clydia Koen, wife of a Civil Rights Activist.

#### Style

The style of documentary that I am using for this piece is expository. This style will affect the film tremendously because the use of perspectives and stories from the characters will help convey and reinforce the message intended. I conduct the narration and set up the scenes and characters as they develop and are introduced.

#### Tone

The tone of the film will be serious, light, and at times slightly comical. "Cairo: A Native's Perspective", will portray the lives and environment of several individuals and the city itself.

#### Structure

This piece will be structured in a logical manner. It will begin with an introduction that gives some history and establish this with some images and stories from some of the main

characters. Next, I will provide a sense of time getting commentary in regard to Cairo's past and present situation. These individuals current lifestyles will help introduce the crisis of the film, Cairo's decline.

#### Resolution

The film will conclude with visiting the characters and discussing where they see Cairo in the future. Their decisions will likely have a direct correlation to the current situation in Cairo. In addition, I will conclude by revisiting issues that were introduced and talk about possible solutions to these problems.

#### Social Significance

This film will depict the characters and their lives as being a product of their environment. Some of the descriptions will be good and others will not, however it will be accurate and will give a greater perspective to Cairo. The piece will have tremendous social significance, because it will give more accurate perspectives of natives of Cairo. Showing these individuals in their natural setting and going about their everyday lives will provide a genuine nature that I strongly believe only a native can deliver.

#### Concern

I hope to make my audience, whether academics or not, regard this film deeply by presenting the lives of these average people who just happen to live in a forgotten town. I will achieve this by presenting the individuals performing their day-to-day activities thus, establishing the relation to the audience. I believe that people tend to care more about individuals that they can relate to.

### Audience Knowledge and Prejudice

The main audience for this film is people in the tristate area, historians and individuals interested in Cairo or Illinois. As I stated earlier, Cairo has always been depicted as a terrible city so this film will be a pleasant surprise to anyone who is unaware of the many great things that this town has provided. As a graduate project, for a Master's of Science degree, from Southern Illinois University School of Mass Communications, my documentary will be available at Morris Library. However, I also plan to make my piece available through several social networking sites, those specifically being, YouTube and Vimeo.

### Thematic Purpose

The thing that I want to demonstrate with this film is that Cairo has been unjustly demonized and the people that live here are just like anyone else. I also want the audience to see the many great things that have come from this once booming river city. Artist like Hale Woodruff and world renowned, journalist Rachel Jones will be highlighted to convey this message.

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Cairo: A Native's Perspective

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