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In a Town Apart, the Pride and Trials of Black Life

By DAMIEN CAVE SEPT. 28, 2008

EATONVILLE, Fla. — Hidden in the theme-park sprawl of greater Orlando, a few miles from the shiny, the loud and the gargantuan, lies a quiet town where the pride and complications of the African-American experience come to life.

Eatonville, the first all-black town to incorporate in the country and the childhood home of Zora Neale Hurston, is no longer as simple as she described it in 1935: “the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, 300 brown skins, 300 good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools and no jailhouse.” It is now a place of pilgrimage. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Ruby Dee have come to the annual Zora! Festival in Eatonville to pay their respects to Hurston, the most famous female writer of the Harlem Renaissance.

And yet in many ways, the town she described — and made a tourist stop by including it in the Florida travel guide produced by the Depression-era Federal Writers’ Project — remains a place apart. It is as independent, dignified and private as it was in the 1930s, when Hurston wrote that rural blacks in Florida often resisted sharing their true thoughts with the white man, who “knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing.”

Even now, in a year when a black presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama, has called for an open conversation about race, many here remain wary of the outsider’s gaze.

"We're very cautious about how our story is told," said Hortense Jones, 59, a lifelong resident and member of the town's oldest church. "It needs to be right."

Eatonville has long been defined as a paradox of triumph and struggle. It is both a historic model of black empowerment and a community of nearly 2,400 where the poverty rates are twice the national average. It is a literary hub but also an oak-shaded example of rural Southern black culture — sometimes disdained, sometimes praised — that was born of American slavery. Not surprisingly, residents here are both proud and protective.

And the concern about Eatonville's image really began with Zora, which is all anyone here calls Hurston. She introduced the world to her hometown through heartfelt, dialect-heavy books like "Mules and Men" (1935) and "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937).

Five paragraphs in the Florida guidebook transformed the town, just off Route 17, a road that runs through the oft-forgotten center of Florida into a stage of black history and human drama. Bold as a bass drum in both life and literature, Hurston led readers to the store owned by Eatonville's first mayor, Joe Clarke, then veered into more private areas. "Off the road on the left," she wrote, "is the brown-with-white-trim modern public school, with its well-kept yards and playgrounds, which Howard Miller always looks after, though he can scarcely read and write."

She also mentioned the new husband of Widow Dash and wrote that Lee Glenn "sells drinks of all kinds and whatever goes with transient rooms."

So in just a few hundred words, Hurston linked Eatonville with self-government but also illiteracy, remarriage and sex. Clearly, Fodor's this was not.

In fact, it was not a portrait everyone appreciated.

"Zora told it like it was," said Ella Dinkins, 90, one of the Johnson girls Hurston immortalized by quoting men singing off-color songs about their beauty. She added: "Some people didn't like that."

Hurston is still remembered here as a vivacious eccentric who frequently returned after her family moved to Jacksonville, Fla. Augustus Franklin, 77, recalled

that when Hurston sped into town, she usually arrived without notice in a thumping Chevrolet, smoking and wearing pants in a town that even today prides itself on dignified dress. Most residents were fascinated, Mr. Franklin said, while many sneered.

“People were always glad to see Zora,” Mr. Franklin said. But, he added, rocking in his chair on a back patio overlooking Lake Sabelia, where Hurston was most likely baptized, “she never did stay too long.”

When Hurston died in 1960, she was poor and her books had fallen out of print. Along with much of the world, Eatonville seemed to have forgotten her.. Though she was once a literary star, a contemporary of Langston Hughes and the only black woman at Barnard College in the 1920s, she was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Fla., where she had been living.

In Eatonville, there were no major memorial services, no grand public readings. “I don’t think they understood her contribution to the world or her legacy at all,” said Valerie Boyd, author of “Wrapped in Rainbows,” a Hurston biography published in 2003.

A turning point came in the 1980s. Orange County officials wanted to put a five-lane highway through town to replace Kennedy Boulevard, the community’s puttering two-lane main street. Orlando’s sprawl had already pushed Interstate 4 through the western edge of town. The proposal came as Eatonville was still recovering from a difficult period in its history.

Forced integration, among other things, had ended the community’s relatively idyllic isolation. In the 1950s, the fight over racial mixing brought hate to the community’s doorstep.

“During that time, a bunch of white boys, they would come through and throw oranges and things at people sitting down on the side,” Mr. Franklin said. “We actually had a lady that got killed from that once. They threw a watermelon out of the car.”

In a 1955 letter to The Orlando Sentinel, Hurston questioned the Supreme Court's demand for forced integration, calling its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* "insulting rather than honoring my race." Residents now say that the desegregation of schools, while positive in some respects, diluted Eatonville's cohesiveness and undermined the confidence of its youth.

"Black children were accustomed to being hugged — I remember this — you hugged your teacher in the morning, you hugged your teacher at night," said N. Y. Nathiri, the daughter of Ella Dinkins and the executive director of Preserve the Eatonville Community, a nonprofit group.

That lasted, she added, until the teachers and students did not come from the same place. "You were not hugging your white teacher because your white teacher — I mean there's a cultural divide there," Ms. Nathiri said.

Civil rights, however, helped create space for many more Zora Neale Hurstons — black writers, actors and artists who rose above prejudice, like she did, with buoyant self-assurance and lines like: "How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company! It's beyond me."

In 1975, the writer Alice Walker trekked to Hurston's unmarked grave and began fighting to resurrect her reputation. Five years later, an acclaimed Hurston biography by Robert E. Hemenway hit bookshelves, reintroducing her to the American canon.

The highway project arrived just as Eatonville's most famous daughter had once again found the spotlight. And this time, Hurston's old neighbors saw her as a savior.

The community began planning in 1988 for a Hurston festival to show what the county could ruin with its highway. Thousands of fans came to the inaugural event two years later, and each January, many return for the celebration.

After several years, the county backed away from its road proposal. "The five-laning of the highway resurrected, it put in what you'd call warp speed, real civic pride," Ms. Nathiri said.

Ms. Boyd put it more simply: "Zora saved Eatonville."

Victory over the highway project has helped change the town's self-image. Out-of-towners like Rachelle Munson, a lawyer who began coming to church here in 1993, started to appear in larger numbers, and residents started to revalue the past.

Eatonville joined the national historic registry in 1998. A new one-story library (named after Hurston, of course) opened in 2006 on a repaved and beautified Kennedy Boulevard.

Today, Eatonville remains a Florida anomaly: only six miles from downtown Orlando, it can, at times, feel like a back street in a summer rain, as small as it did when it was founded with just 27 black families in the 1880s. (It is 90 percent black today.) Outsiders who come looking for Eatonville's story, its meaning, are often still treated with caution.

Advance permission is required for most interviews, and certain things — like the murals at Eatonville's oldest church, painted by a white man, showing black men in the fields — are not allowed to be photographed.

Many in Eatonville, like Ms. Jones, a bold, confident teacher partial to bright red, still fear that their insular community will be misunderstood.

And yet, as the Hurston festival has expanded, a heightened level of hometown pride has also emerged. Young people, in particular, tend to see Eatonville as Hurston saw her entire race: beautiful, problems and all, no better, no worse and as proud, creative, hard-working, silly and mixed-up as other racial and ethnic groups in America.

It is sincere civic affection that can be heard in the voice of Mr. Franklin's nephew, Edwin Harvey, 18, who plans to come back to Eatonville after college to work in local government or for the Police Department, which he said could use some help.

And even those who are younger, like Alondra and Alexia Kenon, 11-year-old twins from Winter Park, seem to have learned to describe Eatonville correctly.

“Most people, if they just drive through here, they’ll think, ‘Oh, this city is nothing compared to any of the other ones,’ ” Alondra Kenon said after church on a recent Sunday. “But if you actually stop and take a moment to look at the history, it’s a very nice city.”

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