

Race Relations Tense in Baker City in 1908

by
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Race relations between black and white people in Baker City in 1908 were tense, not only because a black man was suspected of burning several buildings (see accompanying article this page). On the same day that Fire Chief William Ellis turned over to police a Black suspect in the fires, the following article appeared in the October 13, 1908, edition of the *Baker City Herald*. Local Blacks were protesting the play "The Clansman," which was scheduled to appear on the stage of the Baker City Theater located on the northeast corner of Main and Church.

The "Clansman" took place in Reconstruction-era South Carolina, when Northern occupying forces after the Civil War had put Black officials in charge of state government. The hero of the play was the head of the Ku Klux Klan, and the villain was the mulatto lieutenant governor of South Carolina. The play includes the lynching of a Black man for rape and murder of a female white child. Head of the lynching party was the Ku Klux Klan leader.

When the troop of 45 actors and support staff arrived in town, the newspaper reported much excitement as townspeople watched the unloading of the train, including several cavalry horses. Scarcely a ticket was left unsold.

Following is the text of the *Baker City Herald* article:

Object to Show Colored People of Baker Don't Want the Clansman Petition is Being Circulated Showing Objection of Negroes

Colored people of this city are wrought up over the Clansman, a play depicting race prejudice, that is to show in Baker City on October 21, and today are circulating a petition asking that the play be refused admission to the city. The petition also states that in their opinion the production is overdrawn and unfair to the decent element of the colored race.

One of the Negroes prominent in the move said to a reporter for the Herald today: 'We don't expect to stop the play from coming here but we do want to place ourselves on record against this piece which is very much overdrawn and which is wholly unfair to the black man who is striving to serve his God and make of himself a useful citizen. When Abraham Lincoln took the steps he did to free the Negro he evidently intended them to make good citizens. A great many of them have and it is this class we desire to protect.

'As for the Negro who commits rape and other crimes, we have no more use for him than the white man has. And we have no more use for the white man who does the same crime than we have for the low down Negroes.'