

De-Ro-Loc: Houston's Forgotten Festival

By Calvin D. Blair

It is a cool Tuesday afternoon as the sun begins to set on December 1, 1909, a perfect day to celebrate a Houston tradition. Tom has on his nicest boots, cleanest pants, and best shirt since everyone from the neighborhood is going to be there, and he has no intention of being the worst dressed man in attendance. As he gets closer to Emancipation Park, he can hear the sounds of the fair getting louder and see the bright lights strung across the fairgrounds. This is one of the premier events organized and patronized by the region's African American population. As he approaches the ticket counter, the teller charges Tom admission and proudly welcomes him to the "De-Ro-Loc Carnival and Industrial Exposition!"

Two factors led to the formation of the De-Ro-Loc Carnival, both born as a response to discrimination suffered by African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century. The first arose from a speech delivered by Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (now Hampton University), popularizing the "Hampton Idea." Speaking to a white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, Washington argued that African Americans would gain the greatest benefit from learning skills that could be used in agricultural and industrial jobs instead of attempting to directly challenge the political and social systems of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The speech received a standing ovation. The white audience members in attendance and the press covering the exposition hailed Washington as "King of a Captive People" and called his speech "the most remarkable address delivered by a colored man in America."¹ While the speech was given in 1895, it dominated the way some civil rights leaders thought about furthering the cause until after the Great War; others such as W.E.B. Du Bois disagreed with Washington almost immediately.

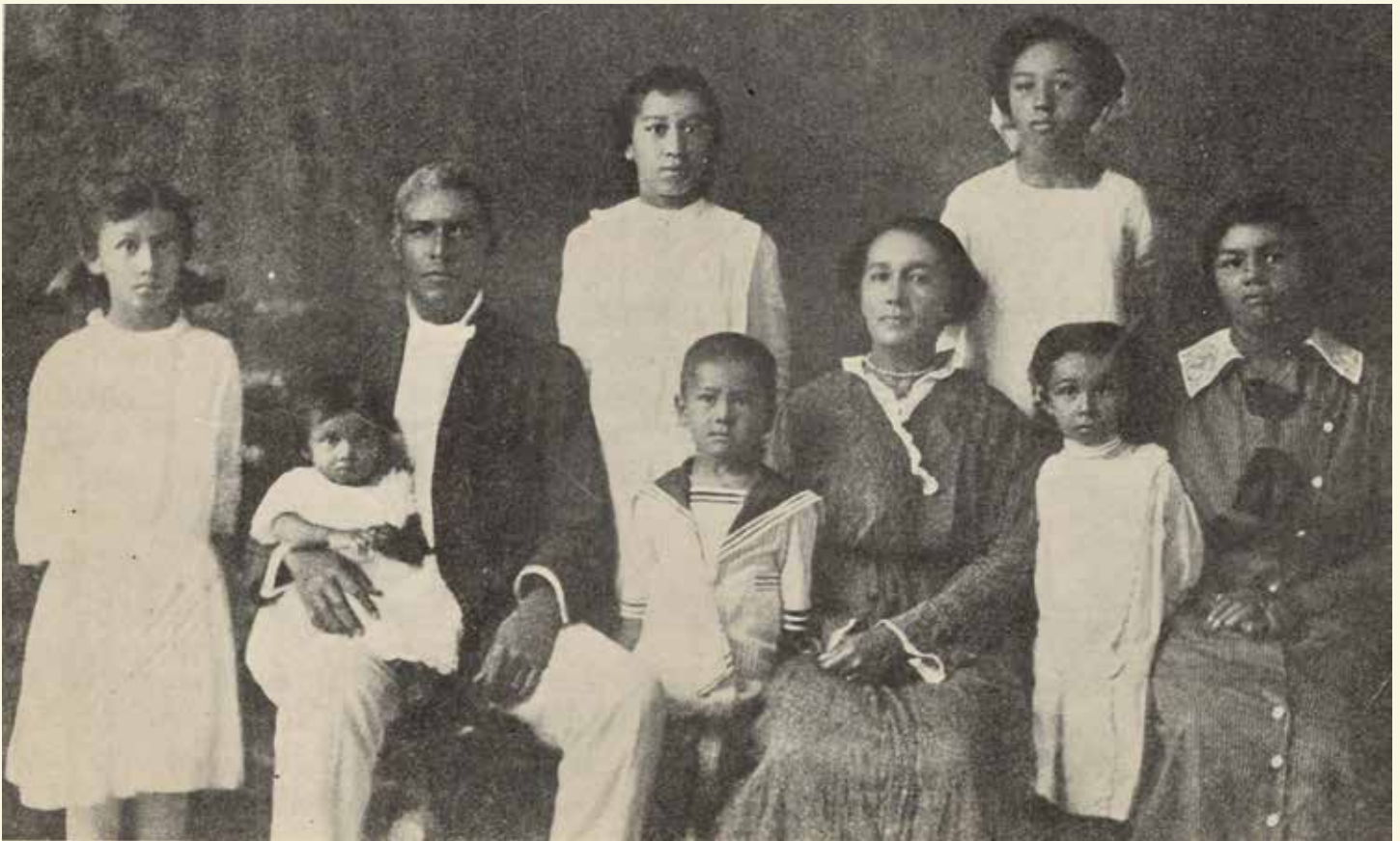
The second factor in the birth of De-Ro-Loc was the segregated No-Tsu-Oh (Houston spelled backwards) Carnival.



African Americans frequently decorated carriages for Juneteenth and De-Ro-Loc celebrations, shown circa 1905, possibly at 319 Robin Street in Fourth Ward. The use of cotton on some buggies highlighted the impact of cotton on the Houston economy.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, SS0281-0038.

For many years local businessmen sponsored an annual carnival to highlight Houston's status in the agricultural marketplace and celebrate the year's harvest.² As civic leaders realized they could grow this informal festival into a real tourist event, they renamed the Fruit, Flower, and Vegetable Festival, "No-Tsu-Oh." It included a royal court presided over by King Nottoc (Cotton) as he visited Houston while away from his home of Tekram (Market) in the kingdom of Sax-Et (Texas). Organizers prohibited blacks from attending No-Tsu-Oh as the city worked to show itself off to visitors. After almost ten years of being excluded from exhibiting or taking part, a group of black businessmen and community leaders decided to host their own festival, giving birth to De-Ro-Loc (Colored spelled backwards).



Major Hannon Broyles, shown with his family, became the first King La-Yol E-Civ-Res at De-Ro-Loc. Broyles married Mary in 1897, and they had eight children. In addition to being a lawyer, Broyles owned Orgen Realty and Investment Company.

Photo from *The Red Book of Houston*, 1915, courtesy of James E. Fisher.

CARVING OUT A PLACE IN "NO-TSU-OH"

Established in 1909, De-Ro-Loc was the brainchild of John A. Matthews who recruited the help of William J. Jones, a former owner and editor of the *Galveston-Houston Times*. Jones suggested they seek the aid of Van H. McKinney, a tutor to journalists as well as creator of and writer for the *Houston Van*, a weekly newspaper serving African Americans. Combining the vision of Matthews with the literary and creative skills of Jones and McKinney, they formed the De-Ro-Loc Carnival Association and created the mythos surrounding the De-Ro-Loc Carnival.³ They crafted the idea of King La-Yol E-Civ-Res (Loyal Service) that followed the Hampton Idea of promoting ethnic harmony.

The association recruited M. H. Broyles as the first king. Broyles had left his job as a teacher at Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College to become a lawyer in 1905 with his own offices in Houston. He was exactly the kind of civic leader who characterized the future of African American leadership in the city. Broyles, who later became heavily involved in the Republican Party, served as an at-large delegate for the state of Texas at the Republican

By the early twentieth century, minstrel shows had fallen in popularity compared to their peak in the mid-nineteenth century. The Georgia Minstrels was the first minstrel show with all African American actors. They were extremely popular in the 1860s and led to numerous spin-off African American minstrel troupes like the one that performed at De-Ro-Loc in 1909. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia.





Located where the Barbara Jordan Post Office stands today, Grand Central Station was home to the Houston East and West Texas Railway and one of three passenger train stations in Houston. Many travelers coming to Houston for De-Ro-Loc arrived at this depot.

Photo courtesy of the George Fuermann "Texas and Houston" Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

National Convention held in Chicago in 1912, and two years later he ran for the state legislature to represent the Harris County area but was not elected.⁴

The first De-Ro-Loc No-Tsu-Oh Carnival and Industrial Exposition was held in Emancipation Park. In 1872, four former slaves led by Reverend Jack Yates raised \$800 to purchase land from the City of Houston to create Emancipation Park, although they did not initially have funds to keep it open year-round.⁵ The ten-acre park was the site of Houston's Juneteenth celebrations marking the anniversary of Gen. Gordon Granger's reading of the Emancipation Proclamation in Galveston, advising Texas slaves of their freedom.

The inaugural De-Ro-Loc ran from November 29 to December 4, 1909. The carnival opened with a three-mile parade that started at Grand Central Station and terminated at Emancipation Park. Visitors to the city arrived by the Houston East and West Texas Line at Grand Central Station and were serenaded by the Isles Brass Band, a Texas group. The Lachmann Company Hippodrome decorated the park with "thirty-five concessions" and arranged for shows such as the Georgia Minstrels. Amusements included a Ferris wheel and merry-go-round, which seemed to be full at every turn.⁶

Despite a little rain, the 1909 De-Ro-Loc Carnival proved itself a financial and cultural success. The carnival's location alternated between Emancipation Park and the site of the second festival, the West End Park in Fourth Ward/Freedman's Town on the fringe of downtown Houston. The West End Ballpark, located in the park, hosted baseball games for Negro Baseball Leagues, Texas minor league teams, spring training for white National League teams, and football games for Rice Institute, and The University of Texas/Texas A&M game during the No-Tsu-Oh Carnival.⁷

SERVICE AND WEATHER

Two words summarize the initial De-Ro-Loc Carnivals: rain and service. It rained during the first three days of the

1910 carnival, resulting in the postponement of the businessmen's parade initially scheduled for Wednesday. Thursday was the first night of relatively clear weather. The football game, which saw Prairie View Agricultural and Mechanical College defeat Wiley College at West End Ballpark, drew the largest attendance of the week.⁸

In 1911 storms in the week leading up to the festival resulted in the delayed arrival of several of the carnival elements, causing the opening to be postponed to Tuesday with some attractions still missing. To make matters worse, the grandstand at West End Ballpark was destroyed by a mysterious fire early on Monday morning, which also damaged three houses owned by African American residents living next to the park. Two Houston Police Department officers stumbled upon the fire well after it started and called in the fire department, which wrestled with the flames until four in the morning. The College Day matchup between Prairie View and Wiley was delayed as crews rushed to reconstruct the grandstand in time for the game. Even when the carnival opened on Tuesday, it continued to rain and the celebration closed on Wednesday due to weather.⁹

In 1912 Van H. McKinney created several thousand full-sized posters to distribute across town and in traditional tourist towns for the festival. The association planned for portions of the grounds to be covered in hopes of avoiding the rain. Dr. Barlow, the organizer of the Exposition Hall, arranged for "several wagon loads of cinders and straw" to be spread along the "Guggle Way" so crowds were not forced to walk through the mud. But the 1912 festival was declared an absolute disaster due to the rain and freezing temperatures.¹⁰ Both De-Ro-Loc and No-Tsu-Oh moved their festivals into the middle of November in 1913 to avoid the pesky weather. Some debate exists over how many De-Ro-Loc events actually took place. During later editions, such as in 1913, it becomes clear that some of the reporting comes directly from the association's press releases rather than from reporters' news stories.

Every year King La-Yol E-Civ-Res heaped praise upon

Houston and its residents. Lofty words played directly into the idea that African American Houstonians were loyal servants to the common goal of building a better community. In 1913 King La-Yol E-Civ-Res praised black Houstonians for their display of “civic pride” and how that would create a healthier sentiment toward members of the local African American community. The next year, the *Chronicle* and *Daily Post* posted a version of almost exactly the same article and speech.¹¹ If the association was handpicking speeches and events for reporting in the newspaper, they also understood the power of the media to publish positive stories about the African American community in Houston and Texas that would showcase their commitment to the Hampton Idea.

King La-Yol E-Civ-Res of 1913 was Dr. E. A. Durham, a forty-eight-year-old physician who received his undergraduate education at Wiley College and his M.D. at Bennet Medical School (now a part of Loyola University). He had this to say at Emancipation Park, “Let them [the world] turn to find a mighty host of black men true and tried, loyally standing at their post of duty, doing their very best to merit this splendid citizenship which you now begin to enjoy.” In the first five years, from 1909 to 1913, every time King La-



In 1909 De-Ro-Loc included a Special Educational and Industrial Day for presentations, exhibits, and discussions with Texas educators that included E. L. Blackshear, president of Prairie View State Normal and Industrial College (now Prairie View A&M). In 1918 the Houston Independent School District named Blackshear Elementary School in his honor. Photo from The Red Book of Houston, 1915, courtesy of James E. Fisher.

Yol E-Civ-Res spoke, he talked about African Americans’ duty to their community. Although a different individual served as king from year to year, his message to be loyal servants to the community and have a great attitude while doing it remained the same.¹² All of that came crashing down as the Great War began; African American troops were serving in Europe, and the seeds were planted for the New Negro movement.



Dr. Benjamin Covington was the fourth king of De-Ro-Loc and subsequently the association’s president in 1913. Covington helped found Houston’s first hospital for blacks, Houston Negro Hospital, later renamed Riverside Hospital. His wife, Jennie, played a large role in founding the Blue Triangle YWCA, among her many community contributions, and his daughter Ernestine attended Julliard due to her musical prowess on the piano and violin. Photo from The Red Book of Houston, 1915, courtesy of James E. Fisher.

DEEPER WATERS

The opening of the deep-water port on the Houston Ship Channel in 1914 enabled Houston to compete with its rival ports in Galveston and New Orleans. In an attempt to harness this energy, No-Tsu-Oh became the Deep Water Jubilee featuring King Retaw (Water). De-Ro-Loc followed suit by expanding the court from the king and two royal attendants to include King E-Civ-Res VI, Prince Du-ty, Princess Cha-ri-ty, Grand Duke La-bor, Lord L-E-X, Lady Justica, Lady Mercia, and Lady Truth and Prudencia. The carnival showcased the king transferring his power of governance to Prime Minister De-Vo-Tion. The story indicated that the king invited all the leaders of industry, and all the followers of Karl Marx as well as Christians and Fabians (a socialist society) to join him in a conclave to discuss how to fix the political problems of his kingdom. The king planned to end all wars, create an equitable distribution of wealth with the removal of a caste system, give everyone property and a free education, and open suffrage to all.¹³ This marked a massive political and philosophical shift from earlier speeches, including the recent one given by Dr. Durham.



Born in Houston in 1868, Charles DeGaultie attended Houston (Colored) High School. A resident of Fourth Ward, DeGaultie was vice president and director of the De-Ro-Loc Association in 1915.

*Photo from *The Red Book of Houston*, 1915, courtesy of James E. Fisher.*

After that, the *Houston Daily Post* published only three more articles about De-Ro-Loc, including one discussing floral arrangements in Wednesday's Galveston Day parade and another about the football game where Prairie View beat Langston University 27-6. Coverage of the 1915 edition of the festival named the king as Charles DeGaultie, the superintendent of First Texas State Insurance Company. It mentioned the football game and briefly described carnival features but did not cover the speeches or the weather.¹⁴ The reasons for these omissions are unknown.

In 1920, the first known archived article in the black-owned *Houston Informer* took the De-Ro-Loc Association to task for its poor organization and lack of advertising. The author condemned the carnival as having "outlived its days of usefulness." He accused the association of being a machine to separate hard-working African Americans from their hard earned money and cried hypocrisy at what the carnival had become despite being run by Baptist and Methodist leaders.¹⁵

How did De-Ro-Loc fall so far? While no single definitive answer exists, it is possible to examine contributing factors. From a logistical standpoint, having so many of the events and days cancelled due to rain limited attendance by locals,

but it especially cut down on people coming from outside the city. Traveling by train was difficult for African Americans in the time period, with segregated cars and limited to no service in dining cars. Even traveling by car presented problems in knowing where a person could stop for food, shelter, or restroom facilities. A person would be unlikely to make that journey if the event might be cancelled. As noted earlier, the De-Ro-Loc Association would plan the carnival a week after No-Tsu-Oh so that they could book the same shows. The difficulty in booking unique carnival attractions in the wake of No-Tsu-Oh's cancellation could have impacted the quality of the carnival severely. Additionally race riots across the country and the Camp Logan Riot in Houston in 1917 drastically shifted white opinions about African Americans when an armed conflict broke out after African American troops, fearing a mob was coming to attack, advanced on the city resulting in seventeen deaths. But perhaps the biggest change came with the emergence of the New Negro movement and Harlem Renaissance that began about the time World War I broke out and continued into the 1920s.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote extensively about African Americans fighting for the rights of oppressed people abroad, being treated kindly by the French people, and then coming home to segregation and abuse. In Du Bois's words:

We return.

We return from fighting.

We return fighting.

Make Way for Democracy. We saved it in France, and by [J]ehovah, we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why.¹⁶

With that fiery call to action, one can see why the *Informer* said, in 1921, that De-Ro-Loc had "outlived its usefulness" in attempting to create an equal playing field between African Americans and whites in Houston. Du Bois hoped that having African American troops join the fight for freedom in Europe, where they were received positively and treated as equals, would help propel civil rights forward in America.¹⁷ When that failed to occur, African American Houstonians, once proud to brag about their civic virtues, seemed scarred less by the horrors of World War I and more by the fact that African Americans' sacrifice had not advanced their fight for equality locally. Booker T. Washington's Hampton Idea was not working in the eyes of many civil rights leaders. Given this disappointment and the growing momentum of the New Negro movement, the ideas once espoused by De-Ro-Loc seemed out of date. King Loyal Service was no longer a viable ideology for a group determined to take a more active role in negotiating its future. Nevertheless, De-Ro-Loc demonstrates the ingenuity and creativity of a community pushed to the margins—a community that is relentless in its spirit and drive to inspire, educate, and entertain, while showcasing its pride in Houston, the place they call home.

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