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## Rural west Michigan Covert Township integrated quietly in the 1860s

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Covert had something to hide.

As far back as the 1860s, officials of the quiet, rural township dutifully reported their numbers of public school students to Lansing to qualify for state funds. What they did not report was that those students were black and white, studying side by side, which would be unheard of in Michigan for decades to come.

This summer marks the 145th anniversary of the arrival of the first African-American settlers in Covert Township and, in a state where racial issues have long been a source of tension and trouble, the start of a remarkable, enduring and, for Michigan, rare story.

Today, the township -- due west of Kalamazoo on the shores of Lake Michigan -- maintains one of the most stable, integrated populations in the state.

"We just didn't have what the outside world had," said lifelong resident Paul Bryant, 75, a descendant of one of the first black families to move to Covert. "We had respect for each other."

### **West Michigan's Covert integrated before it was legal in the state**

Sharing a cigarette with his best friend was not unusual to a teenage Paul Bryant.

But outside his peaceful hometown, he learned, such a gesture was stunning, especially in the 1950s.

Bryant was black; his buddy was white. They grew up in Covert Township, a rural community in western Lower Michigan where integration has always been the norm, not a source of friction.

Half a century later, retired school custodian Bryant, 75, still remembers the shocked looks he got as he alternated drags with his pal while they shot pool.

And he remembers the shock he felt at that shock.

"We just never had that kind of issue in Covert," Bryant said. "... I know how people can be. I worked in Chicago. ... It was a cold place."

If there's one place in Michigan that's truly color-blind, from its school to its cemetery, it may be Covert Township -- a no-stoplight blip on M-140 in Van Buren County where, 145 years ago this summer, a group of black settlers put down roots and nobody blinked.

In Covert Township, blacks and whites have lived and learned and died and prayed next to each other since 1866, peacefully, productively, politically. The only thing Covert was segregated from was segregation itself, and the only time its residents encountered it was when they ventured into the outside world.

In a state where communities tend to be overwhelmingly one color or another, and where racial ratios can change drastically due to white flight or black exodus, Covert has been remarkably stable.

"Covert Township at 1.7 (whites to blacks) is quite good, especially considering the length of time blacks have lived there," said demographer Kurt Metzger, director of Data Driven Detroit.

In fact, Covert Township is the place where segregation never was. Its schools were integrated in the 1860s, long before it was legal in Michigan for black and white children to learn together.

"It was 'don't ask, don't tell' before there was 'don't ask, don't tell,'" said La Donna Golden, 60, treasurer of the local historical society, which proudly displays photos of an integrated 1897 Sunday school class and blacks and whites together at 1940s-era dances.

Historians say blacks were first drawn to the area because it was largely unsettled, which meant they could buy land. It was also near Cass County, an important link in the Underground Railroad that spirited escaped slaves through Michigan to Canada, and to a community of Quakers.

Some freed blacks returned to the area from Canada. Others were escaped slaves looking for a place to put down roots, and some were veterans returning from the Civil War.

"I'd hope peace is a natural attribute," said Paul Rood, 83, who lives and farms on the same land as his ancestors, some of Covert's earliest white settlers.

"The woods and the Indians are very accepting," he said. "There weren't a lot of people. They were friends."

Rood quoted lyrics from the song "You've Got to be Carefully Taught" in the musical "South Pacific": "You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate."

Historian Anna-Lisa Cox, author of a book about Covert, "A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope & Faith," said a key point in Covert's unusual history came in the 1860s when a black resident, William Bright Connor, bought the land that included the local schoolhouse and challenged the local school board to let his children attend. The doors were opened to everybody, and nobody told the state.

In 1868, the same year the state rejected the 15th Amendment giving blacks the right to vote, Dawson Pompey became the first African American to hold elective office in Michigan when Covert residents chose him to oversee local road projects.

"There continued to be small decisions," Cox said. "People made (small) but significant decisions for racial equality."

The legacy has remained. Golden tells a story of trying to walk into a Chicago restaurant, only to learn that there was a different door for black people. Township Supervisor Barbara Rose said she didn't encounter racial bias until she left home to attend Western Michigan University.

Even the turbulent, violent civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s had little effect on Covert, a place that residents say was simply ahead of its time.

Now, the township, like much of rural southwest Michigan, is home to a growing Hispanic population. A report from the Covert Public Schools said the 2011 student population was 37% black, 12% white and 49% Hispanic.

Though some of the newcomers, who are mostly agricultural workers, may face prejudice elsewhere, Covert is once again a cocoon.

"In Covert," said Rose, "we greet everyone with a smile. It's the history of Covert."

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