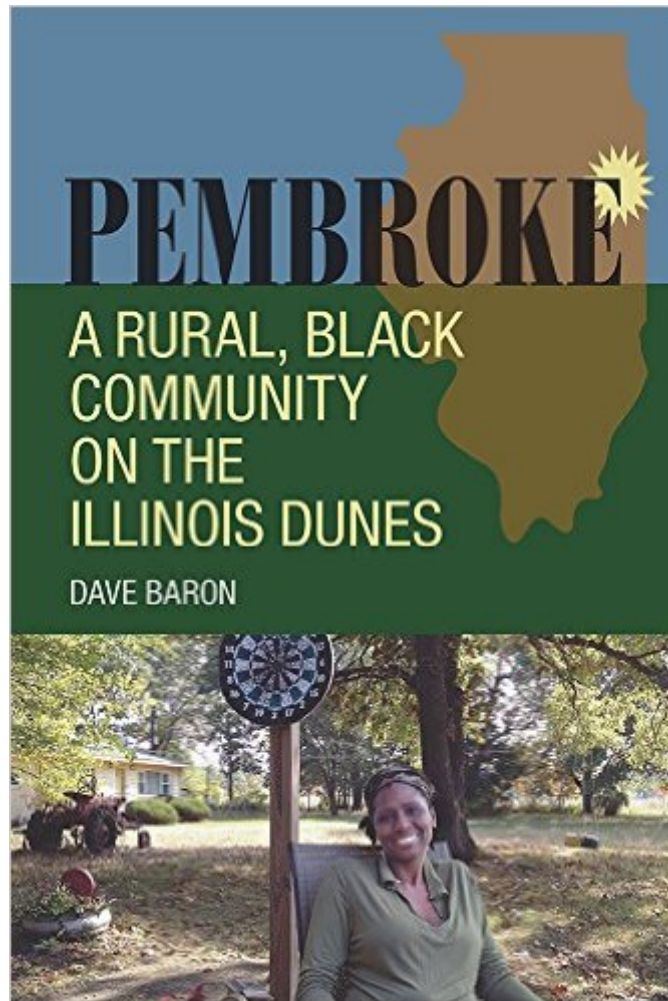


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Pembroke: A Rural, Black Community On The Illinois Dunes



Synopsis

With a population of about two thousand, Pembroke Township, one of the largest rural, black communities north of the Mason-Dixon Line, sits in an isolated corner of Kankakee County, Illinois, sixty-five miles south of Chicago. It is also one of the poorest places in the nation. Many black farmers from the South came to this area during the Great Migration; finding Chicago to be overcrowded and inhospitable, they were able to buy land in the township at low prices. The poor soil made it nearly impossible to establish profitable farms, however, and economic prosperity has eluded the region ever since. *Pembroke: A Rural, Black Community on the Illinois Dunes* chronicles the history of this inimitable township and shows the author's personal transformation through his experiences with Pembroke and its people. A native of nearby Kankakee, author Dave Baron first traveled to Pembroke on a church service trip at age fifteen and saw real poverty firsthand, but he also discovered a community possessing grace and purpose. Baron begins each chapter with a personal narrative from his initial trip to Pembroke. He covers the early history of the area, explaining how the unique black oak savanna ecosystem was created and describing early residents, including Potawatomi tribes and white fur traders. He introduces readers to Pap and Mary Tetter, Pembroke's first black residents, who "according to local lore" assisted fugitives on the Underground Railroad; details the township's wild years, when taverns offered liquor, drugs, and prostitution; discusses the many churches of Pembroke and the nearby high school where, in spite of sometimes strained relations, Pembroke's black students have learned alongside white students of a neighboring community since well before *Brown v. Board of Education*; outlines efforts by conservation groups to preserve Pembroke's rare black oak savannas; and analyzes obstacles to and failed attempts at economic development in Pembroke, as well as recent efforts, including organic farms and a sustainable living movement, which may yet bring some prosperity. Based on research, interviews with residents, and the author's own experiences during many return trips to Pembroke, this book "part social, cultural, legal, environmental, and political history and part memoir" profiles a number of the colorful, longtime residents and considers what has enabled Pembroke to survive despite a lack of economic opportunities. Although Pembroke has a reputation for violence and vice, Baron reveals a township with a rich and varied history and a vibrant culture.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

My exposure to Pembroke has been limited but reading Pembroke: A Rural, Black Community on the Illinois Dunes has made me want to learn more about the area and spend additional time in the community. Dave Baron's account expertly combines both the history of the area from its geographical beginnings and the unique process that made the dunes and savannah possible, to the trials and triumphs of the first families who settled the area, to the Pembroke residents today who continue to create its incredible culture. Interspersed throughout the book are also stories of the author's own experiences in the Pembroke community and the profound effect it has had on his own life. This book will be of interest to anyone with a passion for Illinois history, for black history or just an interest in what can happen when a person takes the time to look outside their typical worldview and the beauty that can be found just beyond. I highly recommend this book!

I grew up in Pembroke (lived there from 1953-1966), lived in what is now called Old Hopkins Park and my grandparents were a part of the Morgan Park Group that settled in and around Leesville, My granddad was a deacon at Greater St. Paul. I never saw or heard of a buffalo in the area and I would have known as I spent hours walking the woods alone. The Catholic population, although an integral part of the community was small and this effort seems to give much more credit for development to the parish than was an actuality. The book, is not historically inclusive, is narrowly focused and probably would have been better had it been done in collaboration with actual residents or residents with more social history. This seems to be one more effort to define and describe an African American community from a non African American perspective. It is an incomplete effort at best with strong basis. I am going to read it again and see if my view changes.

The social history is the most limited and Uncle Bub was not Bud. We knew there were no wealthy people, some people were better off than others but everybody worked and working doesn't make one wealthy. So much of the rich culture that existed prior to the 1970s was left out and would have added much to this effort. This is a missionary perspective, perhaps? I can't wait to see what others who grew up in Pembroke think.

Disclaimer: yes, I know Dave Baron but I was not paid for this review! This is, in one sense, a very personal narrative of how a church service trip to a rural, black community changed a young, white boy's life and an eye-opening account of Pembroke's development, challenges and resiliency. You learn about the land and its people and why it has, and continues to be, a true homeland for many despite persistent exploitation and racism.

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