LOS ANGELES TIMES

FAMILY

Continued from E1

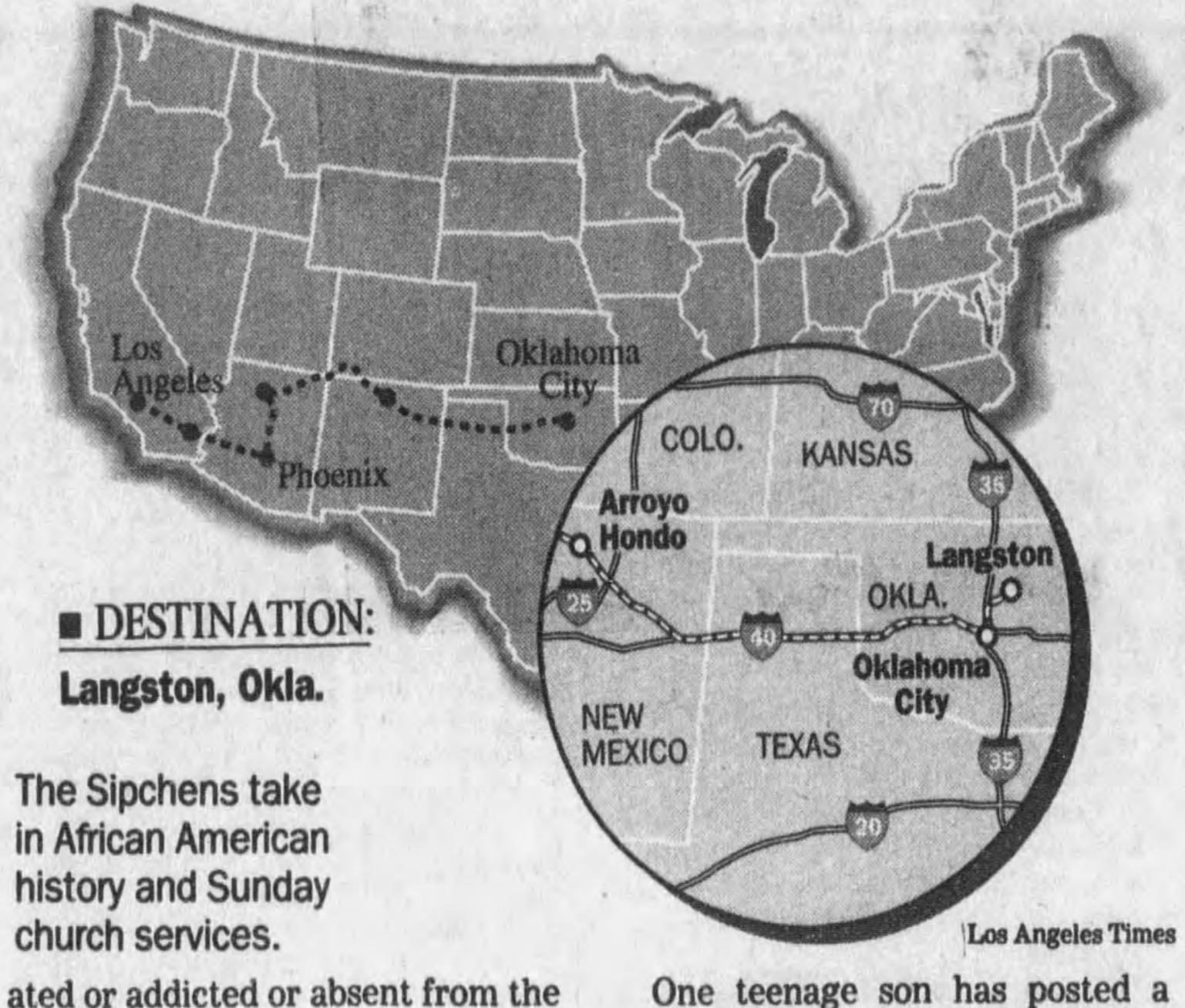
the back of the RV to finish struggling into his dress clothes. A shy 7-year-old, he modestly pulls the curtain separating the rear "bedroom" from the front of the RV.

Then Pam hits a little bump and the girls shriek with a glee that only kids who are supposed to be on their best behavior ever muster. Ballard and I spin around in time to see Robert sprawled on the linoleum floor, with only his head now hidden behind the curtain.

Robert picks himself up and we all get back to getting acquainted.

Ballard was born in South-Central Los Angeles and grew up near Central and Imperial, with four brothers and three sisters. At age 8, he says, he watched the 1965 Watts riots in awe but without a shred of context. He had, he says, little notion of who he was or where he came from.

"Like the vast majority of African American males then, I had an image problem. All I'd seen on TV was 'Amos and Andy' or Rochester on 'Jack Benny.' It definitely had



ated or addicted or absent from the home.

The small church is blessedly air-conditioned. Its big arched windows look out on endless green landscape, watered all summer, it seems, with the Sunday sweat of folks in church clothes.

Our family had forgotten that services in predominantly black churches tend to run about twice as long as those in the predomi-

Camp Might Give Sylvia, 8, Hope

TIMES CAMP FUND

wo years ago, 8-year-old Sylvia and her younger siblings saw their father violently attack their mother. The woman was so frightened that she fled the apartment and left her children alone for three days. Sylvia's father is a severe and chronic alcoholic who frequently abandons the family and rarely provides any financial support.

This year Sylvia finally got her own bed. She is grateful that she no longer has to sleep in the same room as her parents.

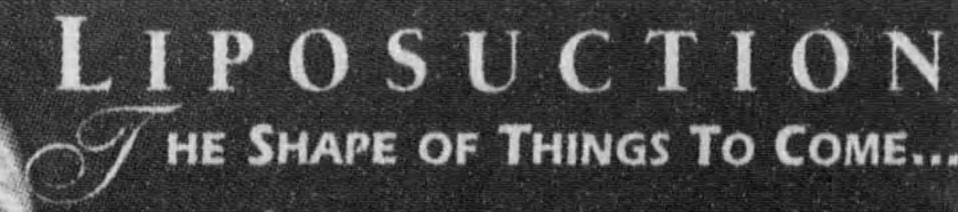
Sylvia hopes one day to be a nurse or a police officer so that she can help other people in her crimeridden neighborhood to feel safer and healthier. A week at summer camp would give Sylvia a rare opportunity to temporarily escape the repressive environment of her home. It might give her hope for a future she may not believe possible.

Since its creation in 1953, the

may send donations, which are taxdeductible, to The Times Summer Camp Fund, P.O. Box 53401, Los Angeles, Calif. 90074-3401. No door-to-door solicitation has been authorized or will be made.

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its effect."

History, he says, was a big part of his salvation.

"The bug hit me when I was 10. My aunt was taking a class at Southwestern College, and I remember her coming home one night and getting in a debate with my grandmother. My aunt said James Brown was the greatest living black American of the past 10 years. . . . And my grandmother said, 'No, no. Martin Luther King is the greatest.'"

That kitchen table conversation eventually meandered into family accomplishments. Ballard's grandmother, who was working as a cook for Julie Andrews at the time, told him his great-grandfather had been a schoolteacher and butcher in Muskogee, Okla. She also introduced him to a little-known piece of history: That many Native American tribes had owned black slaves. His great-great grandmother, he discovered, had been the slave of Choctaws, who brought her with them to Oklahoma from Mississippi.

"Most of my friends didn't have any idea about their family history," Ballard says. So just knowing he had ancestors who had overcome massive hardships gave his self-esteem an uncommon boost.

Over the years, Ballard's family trickled slowly to California. In 1976, his mother and stepfather led the clan back the other way.

nantly white churches we've attended. Luckily, they also tend to be about twice as engaging.

So, squirming was minimal-although Robert did fiddle with his newly purchased petrified sharks' teeth while Scott's daughter sang an exquisite Strauss aria.

Toward the end of the service, Scott urged members of the small congregation to offer their thoughts on fathers and family.

As it happens, two of the four men who stood to testify have ties to South-Central L.A. Larry Reed, a tall man with hair that shows a dash of gray, spent his career as a parole officer with the California Youth Authority in Los Angeles before retiring to Oklahoma. He lived in the vortex of the incarceration-and-fatherlessness tornado, he said. "I have seen a child die in his mother's arms."

To fight the cycle, Reed developed a project to steer young people off the streets and into music. Now he plans to donate half of his 50-acre parcel on Lake Langston to a community youth center.

The other former Angeleno to testify was Ballard.

"I only met my biological father three times," he said, struggling with emotion.

But one by one, male mentors had stepped into his life to fill the void, helping him avoid the street life that swept many of his kin into lives of crime and drugs.

scription in circling the site on this steamy afternoon. The reverent hush is powerful.

photograph of himself and his fa-

ther. Underneath is a piece of

paper: "I miss you, Dad, a little

more every day. It doesn't get

easier with time. I will always have

a hole in me. . . . My heart was

ripped out of my chest. . . . Have

you ever imagined that on Father's

Day, you'd come to visit a fence to

We join families of every de-

tell your dad how you feel?"

As I hold Emily's hand in the silence, I'm struck by a thought: With so many forces ripping families apart, it's a miracle that people still work so hard to piece things together again.

Thursday: Dinner with Jocelyn Elders-parental guidance recommended.

Camp Fund, supported by donations from Times readers and employees, has generated more than \$17 million and has helped 360,000 children attend camp.

It costs an average of \$125 to provide a child with a week's stay at summer camp. Unless donors request otherwise, all donations of \$15 or more will be published.

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"My first night here, when I saw all those stars, I said, 'Oh my!'" Ballard recalls. "That was a true revelation."

Two years later, he moved to this rural part of the state, just north of Oklahoma City, to attend Langston University, a historically black college founded in 1897 at the height of segregationist Jim Crow laws.

n Oklahoma, his fascination with L history deepened. He learned that when the Emancipation Proclamation freed his ancestors, the law deemed them Native Americans, so they received acreage from the government. They turned it into a prosperous farm and established themselves in their small Oklahoma community.

In the racially tense days before World War I, however, the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups flourished. One morning a group of Ballard's ancestors awoke to find a recently married young brother hanging from a tree. They abandoned their land the next day and moved to Muskogee.

"I don't think they ever did reach the same level of prominence," Ballard says. "They just went ahead and took blue collar jobs."

Today, Ballard is historian in residence at Langston, a position that comes with a remote house overlooking a lake of the same name. We do most of our talking here, while Ashley sits in the RV out front taking an algebra final she'll Fed Ex to her teacher, and Emily and Robert bicycle down to the lake to fish. Ballard and I, meanwhile, move through rooms filled with black readjust and accept the blended history, from artifacts about such heroes as the Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen to demeaning Aunt Jemima-style bric-a-brac. What catches my eye-and gets Ballard to rummaging through a room brimming with unsorted boxes-are his old black-andwhite portraits of African American families. These studies in dignity, love and solidity take me back to the theme of the morning's church service.

congregation, had three sets of encyclopedias and made it clear that they weren't just decorative. His stepfather, Ballard said, was an electrical contractor and inspector for the L.A. Unified School District. "He taught me about being responsible."

Then there was the Southern Area Boys Club, on 120th Street in Los Angeles. The director, Ballard said, "taught me to play chess, football, baseball . . . taught me to be a team player."

When he reached Langston, other mentors came forward to make sure the inner city kid stayed the course. Ballard is helping to repay his debt to all those mentors, he said, by producing and narrating the Oklahoma PBS series "Ebony Chronicles," which examines historical topics from the civil rights movement to Bill Pickett, the black cowboy who invented the rodeo sport of bulldogging.

After the church service, Scott invited the congregation into the church basement for a special surprise feast whipped up by his wife and daughters. We arranged ourselves around folding tables and dug into plates heaped with smoked turkey, home-baked ham, mashed yams, sauteed string beans, shredded chicken stuffing, homemade biscuits and a peach cobbler so good that I thought a sermon on the sin of gluttony was in order.

MILTON BERLE

AL DAVIS

Instead, Pam and Emily sat at

In geography and landscape, this rural town's Pioneers of Salters African Methodist Episcopal church couldn't be farther from the inner city. In a sense, though, all African American communities are linked, and this Sunday's sermon had moved from a discussion of the prodigal son to a plea for increased commitment by black fathers-too many of whom, railed the Rev. Magnus W.T. Scott, are incarcerone table talking to people about the trip, and our table launched into a discussion of family.

Lawrence D. Grear, chairman of the social sciences and humanities department at Langston, took a pragmatic view: "Society has to family as the new model."

That doesn't mean the nuclear family is dead, Grear said, but rather that intact families must accept reality and assist their fragmented brethren. Scott, who has pastored the church for 15 years, is more traditional.

"We have to do more to return family to the way it used to be," he said. "We have to educate the parents and the males in particular about their responsibilities and obligations."

A fter Langston, we stop in A Oklahoma City and make a pilgrimage to the site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, destroyed by Timothy McVeigh. People from every state, it seems, have hung tokens of sorrow and support in the chain-link fence that surrounds the site. But the most moving tributes are from members of the families of those killed.

