

A Look At History: All-Black Nicodemus, Kansas

By Dennis Farney
Staff Reporter of *The Wall Street Journal*

Every man was his own Moses here, searching for a personal promised land.

Nicodemus was settled by ex-slaves, after fleeing the nightriders and the repression of the post-reconstruction South for abolitionist Kansas. It was the autumn of 1877. They had abandoned Kentucky's bluegrass country for the raw emptiness of the Kansas prairie; they burrowed into the ground like animals and burned dried manure to keep alive. They would survive to build an improbable town in an improbable setting: all-black Nicodemus, all alone in its blackness on the high plains of western Kansas.

Remains of the Day

But can capitalizing upon a unique past secure what now seems a precarious future? On that question rests the survival of Nicodemus, the most visible remnant of a remarkable chapter of black history.

Nicodemus, billed by its 19th-century promoters as "The Largest Colored Colony in America," is

fighting for its life. The town and its surrounding farms total no more than 50 people. Its stores are gone and its schools long closed. Its vacant lots are cluttered with old trucks and farm machinery. Its scattered houses could be encompassed in a few small blocks. Its only weapons are history itself - and a powerful sense of community that keeps tugging expatriates home.

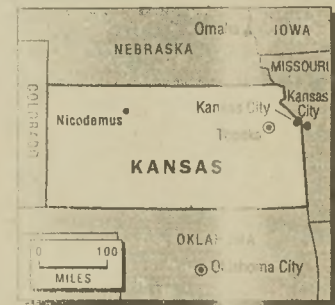
Sixty-two-year-old Charlesetta Bates has come home from Southern California, where she kept house for the rich and famous and once served John Wayne her apple pie. Her sister, Ernestine Van Duvall, 70, also came back from California; she made lemon pie for Walt Disney. Veryl Switzer, a running back for the 1950s Green Bay Packers, still journeys from his administrative job at Kansas State University to his farm land just outside town.

There is something here that's rare in a nation of interchangeable suburbs. It is a sense of identity and of the continuity of history. Buried on Mt. Olive's little hilltop is Angela Bates' great-great grandmother, America Bates. The name

is appropriate, for what has unfolded here is a uniquely American story - and, argues Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter, an overlooked one.

The Western frontier had black homesteaders, black soldiers and black cowboys, Ms. Painter notes. Yet the history of the West is typically depicted as a "hyper-Anglo" experience. "The myth is that the cities were full of all these swarthy people with curly hair," she says, "while the West was the antithesis of all that. Actually, blacks played their part in Western history. Nicodemus is an expression of black frontier hopes."

Hope was in dwindling supply for Southern blacks in the white backlash that followed the end of reconstruction in 1876. But an escape route was opening as America moved west with the railroads. By 1877 the frontier was here in western Kansas. That year seven speculators - six blacks and a white - incorporated this town. They named it Nicodemus for a legendary slave who managed to buy his freedom, and they fired off handbills grandly addressed to "the Colored Citizens of the United



States."

And they came, first from Kentucky, later from Tennessee and Mississippi. By 1878, Nicodemus' population has soared to nearly 700, including some whites. Nothing in their experience had prepared the former slaves for the blazing heat, bitter cold and wind-swept grass.

The first waves of settlers - who were fairly well-organized and had at least some financial reserves - helped plant an idea which quickly spread far beyond this little town.

An enterprising former slave who had no part in the initial settlements, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, began drumming up migration to Kansas so huge that the migration came to be called the Exoduster. The Exoduster movement reached fever pitch in 1879, when 10,000 blacks poured into Kansas during a single four-month period. Frederick Douglass, the national black leader, deplored blacks' abandoning the South "as Lot did Sodom." Congress held worried hearings. The Kansas governor feared his young state was about to be overwhelmed by the destitute. Ultimately, the fears proved exaggerated: The movement faded away after 1880.

A few Exodusters settled here, although most gravitated toward

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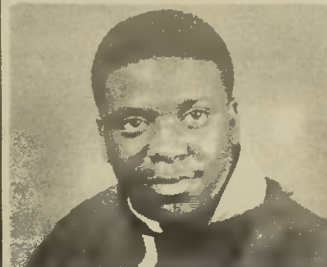
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