THE SPIRIT OF NICODEMUS

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The following faculty have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in History.

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ABSTRACT

When it was first settled in 1877, Nicodemus, Kansas was not the only all-African American community west of the Mississippi, but it is the only one remaining today. While many rural communities founded in Kansas and the western United States in the aftermath of the Civil War perished for various reasons, Nicodemus continues to exist. This thesis examines why Nicodemus has been able to overcome adversity when other towns could not. I propose that there is an intangible characteristic found among the people of Nicodemus which stems from the determination of the ex-slaves who first settled the town that has led those who have followed to persevere in Western Kansas.

In conducting the research on this project, I used the primary documents of Nicodemus residents that can be found in the Graham County Historical Society located in Hill City, Kansas, and I traveled to Topeka, Kansas to peruse the Kansas State Historical Society's archives of nineteenth and early-twentieth century newspapers to ascertain a more public accounting of events in that community. Other sources, both primary and secondary, were easily located within Ablah Library on the campus of Wichita State University.

PREFACE

I spent my childhood a mere fifteen miles from Nicodemus, Kansas. I know firsthand how easy it is to take this community for granted. I knew the significance of the only surviving all-black town west of the Mississippi River, but other than a few field trips for school, I never actually took the opportunity to explore this community's past. In choosing a thesis topic, I decided that the time had come to rectify my mistake.

Most of what has been written on Nicodemus focuses on the first decade of its existence in which the settlers arrived, founded the town, and endured a boom to bust economy after the railroads bypassed Nicodemus town in the late 1880s. Over the course of my research, I came across numerous items that were either given brief mention in the other histories or omitted altogether. While I include what others before me have previously covered, in the following pages, I additionally write about the forces that led to the creation of Nicodemus, the political activity of the settlers, and the episodes of racism. Finally, I examine how the people of Nicodemus managed to survive economic collapse in the twentieth century. I argue that their experiences of the South and frequent reminders of their skin color created a determination to exercise their rights as citizens and form and maintain a successful town.

Having completed my research, most all of which was conducted either in the archives of the Graham County Historical Society in Hill City or at the Kansas Historical Society's center in Topeka, I gained an appreciation for Nicodemus that I never truly had when I lived minutes away. Nicodemus was and remains a town where good, hard-working people reside. The history of this National Historic Site represents the achievement of the American spirit—that a determination to overcome adversity and hard work leads to success, no matter one's background. This is a lesson personified in the people of Nicodemus.

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CHAPTER ONE

RECONSTRUCTION, ITS DEMISE, AND THE FOUNDING OF NICODEMUS

The story of Nicodemus begins long before its establishment in 1877 and far away from the banks of the north fork of the Solomon River. Upon the conclusion of the Civil War, the victorious Union, led by the Radical Republicans in Congress, determined to create a new order in the vanquished Confederacy that would bolster Grand Old Party (GOP) majorities in Congress. Overruling the conciliatory overtures of President Andrew Johnson to repair the South's bonds to the Union, the Republican-dominated Congress used Reconstruction to impose its will. The ratification of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution signified a new hope for the former slaves of the South. These amendments bestowed upon the newly-freed persons rights that had been denied them since their arrival to the North American continent. Now, in theory, they had the opportunity to exercise their rights and create a new future in which blacks could enjoy the same privileges as whites. Under the attentive eye of Republicans in Congress, such hopes were at least partially realized.

For the ten-plus years of Reconstruction, southern blacks comprised a large Republican voting bloc which threatened Democratic dominance. Not only did the GOP earn black support because it was the Party of Lincoln, but after the Civil War, southern Republicans supported the interests of the working class, supported free public schooling, and also exemption laws that denied creditors access to a debtor's personal property. Conversely, southern Democrats were both anti-black and anti-worker.[1] Accounting for a majority of voters in five states and a near majority in three others, enfranchised blacks helped elect Republicans to majorities in state

[1] Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 1977), 35.

houses as well as to several gubernatorial positions. On the federal level, Republican majorities in Congress expanded as a result of their new-found southern voting bloc, which also placed Hiram Revels of Mississippi in the Senate, the first black man to hold such a position.[2] Although Revels was the only man of color in the Senate, sixteen blacks throughout the South took seats in the House of Representatives, and over six hundred served in the state legislatures during Reconstruction. Despite their strength at the polls, however, the position of blacks in southern society remained precarious as only the presence of the Union forces guaranteed their rights. This presence proved fleeting when the Compromise of 1877 gave Republican Rutherford Hayes the White House following the 1876 election in exchange for an end to federal occupation of the South. This action effectively ended the Reconstruction experiment.

As the historian C. Vann Woodward noted, the withdrawal of federal troops marked the birth of the New South.[3] The erosion of Reconstruction ideals, however, commenced almost as soon as the federal government divided the South into military districts. The large majority of whites, who had either continued to be openly hostile towards their black neighbors or had learned to tolerate—but not accept—them, worked to maintain the existence of the South's pre-Civil War social structure. Democratic "Redeemers" led the attack against the Republican onslaught by using the time-honored Southern tradition of playing upon race differences, which included invoking racial pride among poor whites who tended to support the GOP's policies. It was better to be poor—sometimes to the point of destitution—than it was to be black. For anyone who felt otherwise, whether black or white, they often became the victims of terrorism, with the reigning group of terror known as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). Such harassment against

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[2] Revels served only from 1870-1871, but Blanche Bruce, also of Mississippi, served a full six-year term beginning in 1875. After he completed the term in 1881, no other black served in the Senate until Edward Brooke of Massachusetts was elected in 1967.

[3] C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 4.

blacks and liberal whites proved successful as the Democrats won back power in several state legislatures by 1871.

Furthermore, the practice of segregation had begun, first with Protestant denominations (although blacks were oftentimes the ones breaking away to form their own congregations) before reaching public schools and social functions.[4] The practice of segregation, especially in the lower South, had been a common feature decades before it was officially encoded in the 1890s.[5] Nevertheless, even as late as 1878, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a staunch abolitionist who participated in planning Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry and commanded black soldiers during the Civil War, visited Virginia, South Carolina, and Florida. Writing of his observations of the South in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Higginson found race relations to be comparable to those in New England. He asked readers, "How can we ask more of the States formerly in rebellion than that they should be abreast of New England in granting rights and privileges to the colored race? Yet this is now the case in the three States I name; or at least if they fall behind at some points, they lead at some points."[6] Additionally, Sir George Campbell, a British member of Parliament, travelled through the South and was impressed by the racial harmony he witnessed.[7]

Yet while "a South Carolinian" agreed that the different races of his state interacted peacefully and that the freedman had "enhanced material prosperity," several of his comments made for ominous portents for the future. In South Carolina, "The whites regard the negro as an inferior animal, admirably adapted to work and to wait, and look on him, 'in his proper place,' with a curious mixture of amusement, contempt, and affection. It is when he aspires to

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[4] Ibid., 15.

[5] Ibid., 23.

[6] Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "Some War Scenes Revisited," *Atlantic Monthly* 52 (July, 1878), 6. He wrote that Florida, Virginia, and South Carolina were at an intermediate point in advanced racial relations, not as far along as West Virginia, North Carolina or the border states, but the three were way ahead of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

[7] Woodward, 17.

participate in politics or otherwise claim privileges that their hatred becomes intense."[8] The latent animosity thus remained embedded in South Carolina, and the "South Carolinian" continued to write that his fellow residents "would not be unwilling to restrict the freedom of the negro in many such things as wandering about at night, holding public meetings, attending day schools—or any at all,—and living in idleness . . . while we are in the Union, encroachments on negro liberty will be made cautiously, slowly, and under disguises."[9]

While it may be unfair to say that the outsiders Higginson and Campbell were duped during their journeys, they apparently did not see cracks in the façade and failed to discover the true nature of race relations in the South which "a South Carolinian" certainly described more accurately. What the soldier and British Parliamentarian did not see and did not write for their Northern audience was that the return of Democratic power in local government marked the beginnings of curtailing the rights and privileges of freedmen. The experiences of these two men were not terribly different from those of Frederick Law Olmsted's when he traveled the South prior to the war. An avowed abolitionist, he took note and sympathized with the plight of blacks both free and slave, but whites did what they could to promote how good life was for everyone in their section. A Virginia man argued that the condition of the black race under slaver had "improved *two thousand per cent*.!"[10] An Alabama woman, "a very excellent lady," illustrated for her northern visitor "how little cruelty there was in the separation of husband and wife" in slavery, because blacks lacked affection for one another.[11] At a sugar plantation in Louisiana, Olmsted, highly impressed with the operation, wrote of how the slaves regarded their master

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[8] A South Carolinian, "The Result in South Carolina," *Atlantic Monthly* 41 (January, 1878), 6.

[9] Ibid., 11.

[10] Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, With Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 106.

[11] Ibid., 556.

with affection, and he returned that affection with just treatment.[12] Although Olmsted did not appear to believe everything he heard, his tone often suggests that he was agreeable to the southern argument. Even in a time when slavery existed, northerners did not seem to grasp the true complexities of racial relations in the South. Thus, it is little wonder that Higginson and Campbell returned from the South impressed with the advanced condition of freedmen without noticing troublesome signs pointing to the contrary.

If the actions of the Redeemers on the local level caused blacks and Radical Republicans alarm, then the inaction of the federal government signaled the return of the Old South was not too far off in the distance. The continued harsh Republican policies against the white South found dwindling support among northerners who desired a relaxation of regional tensions. Also adversely affecting the black position in the midst of the Democratic attack was that northerners increasingly embraced the view that blacks were intellectually and morally inferior and needed to be watched over and tutored by whites.[13] This is unsurprising given that many northerners opposed the Civil War for fear of a black race freed from bondage. But while the Radical Republicans dominated Congress in the years succeeding the Civil War, southern race relations had become so liberal that northerners were puzzled and sometimes repulsed by the racial harmony on display to the south.[14] With the start of the 1870s, most liberal racial attitudes had retreated while the North turned its attention to rapid industrialization.

Meanwhile, when the Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment distinguished between national and state citizens in the *Slaughterhouse Cases* of 1873, the judiciary paved the way for the continued curbing of black rights in the South. The pleas of Radical Republicans to

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[12] Ibid., 657-662.

[13] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 569.

[14] Woodward, 25.

protect civil rights in the South were ignored, and in the 1874 mid-term elections, the Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives. Although the Compromise of 1877 is generally regarded as the end of Reconstruction, the erosion of federal power in protecting citizens' rights had been a steady process beginning in the early 1870s. The Compromise merely marked Washington's full retreat in such matters.[15] Reconstruction's efforts to place blacks on an equal footing with whites in the former Confederacy had been—with the exception of some legislative victories—a failure.

Despite the steady erosion of civil rights and episodes of terror against blacks and liberal whites as the years passed in the Reconstructed South, C. Vann Woodward wrote that race relations were not as terrible as they soon would be in the coming decades. If racism had been oppressive, he rationalized, the exodus of blacks from the South would not have taken more than a decade to begin. So what prompted blacks to leave when they had the franchise and race relations elsewhere, according to C. Vann Woodward, were no better? The answer is the result of economic opportunity, or a lack thereof.

No matter what legislation the federal government enacted to protect black civil rights, all efforts were in vain if the economic plight of the freed slaves was not addressed. Along with life and liberty, owning property was one of John Locke's unalienable rights, and for southern blacks, owning and working one's land without an overseer constituted their definition of freedom.[16] Radical Republicans, led by Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania, attempted to redistribute the lands of rebels, but the lack of a coherent method to carry out the reform doomed the initiative. Unfortunately, without the necessary land reforms, the sharecropping system developed, preventing freedmen from attaining any form of prosperity or

[15] Foner, 583.
[16] Painter, 6.

independence. Under the sharecropping system that essentially replaced the plantation system, a black tenant leased a plot of land from a former plantation owner and grew a cash crop of which the tenant shared a percentage of the profit with the landlord. In order to purchase supplies, sharecroppers had to take loans from their landlords, who in turn charged high interest rates that soaked up any profits made from the harvest.

Although there are sporadic examples of tenants earning and keeping some money after the harvest, almost all evidence suggests that tenants found themselves deeply in debt, and they realized that the sharecropping system worked against tenant interests.[17] Furthermore, it was not atypical for a tenant to sign a contract in which he waived his legal rights of exemption of personal property where, in the event of a poor harvest or low prices, the tenant forfeited all personal property to an unsympathetic landlord.[18] Without any personal land and often heavily indebted, black sharecroppers, though free, were shackled by poverty and the bonds of economic dependence. If they sought support from whites, they obviously did not find it from those in the South, and clearly, support of the black cause among Northerners not only flagged as the 1870s progressed, but attitudes devolved to embrace the notion of black inferiority.

Although never ubiquitous, such sentiments had existed in the North long before the Civil War commenced. William Lloyd Garrison and other like-minded abolitionists who believed in equality comprised a very small minority. In general, people listened to the Harvard scientist Louis Aggasiz, who claimed an adult black brain was no more developed than that of a white child's, and he compared the mental capacity of blacks to that of an orangutan.[19] Even William Seward, Salmon Chase, and Abraham Lincoln, hopefuls for the Republican nomination for

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[17] Ibid., 59.
[18] Ibid., 60
[19] John Hope Franklin, *Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 50.

president in 1860, thought the black race inferior to whites.[20] Because of such prevalent attitudes, northern states prohibited blacks, a mere 2 percent of the North's population in 1860, from voting, attending schools with white students, and using public accommodations.[21] Only toward the end of the Civil War did these barriers begin to fall.[22] As more blacks migrated from the South to the North and exacerbated racial tensions in the decades preceding the war, whites sometimes attacked the migrants. Such instances of violence greatly pleased southerners, whose newspapers provided ample space for such accounts.[23] As northerners tired of Reconstruction, their antebellum attitudes towards blacks returned. Thus, it is little wonder that northern observers such as General Higginson commented that blacks in the South after the Civil War were essentially no worse off than those living above the Mason-Dixon Line.

The attitudes of northerners, though, affected a very small percentage of blacks in America. Southerners, on the other hand, imposed their superior attitudes on a much larger number of blacks. Along with the onset of segregation and the continued constriction of civil rights in the South, the economic burdens which freedmen could not shirk required an examination of their place in the South. The reconstructed South collapsed under the reemergence of the Democratic Redeemers, and supporters in the North no longer existed or, at the very least, no longer had any influence. Ex-slaves began to explore where they could go with their families to escape their oppressive living conditions. The emigration of southern blacks that began as a trickle in the early 1870s quickly gained momentum and developed into an "exodus." The mass migration by the end of the decade caused enough bewilderment to prompt the Senate

[20] Ibid., 55-56.
[21] Foner, 26.
[22] Ibid., 28.
[23] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), 232.

into holding hearings on the subject.[24] The Exodusters, as the southern black emigrants described themselves, invoking the religious image of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, frequently moved in search of better sharecropping contracts or other opportunities, but more often than not, they moved either to nearby counties or ventured only so far as to other states in the South.[25]

A small but relevant minority of Exodusters were disgusted with trying to work a farm not only because they recognized the hopelessness of trying to make a comfortable living, but also because it reminded them of their time in slavery. As a result, such blacks migrated to urban centers in both the North and South.[26] In the North and South, the presence of black artisans and factory workers antagonized whites, who feared black competition for jobs. In both regions, whites often attacked blacks to intimidate the latter into seeking employment elsewhere.[27]

Longer trips were usually prohibited by a lack of funds, but thousands located the means to enable an escape from the South. Escape even went beyond the American continent, as numerous blacks concluded that they would never be accepted as equals in this nation where supposedly all men were created equal.[28] Many pairs of eyes, especially in South Carolina and to a lesser extent, Louisiana, turned toward the African nation of Liberia, where the American Colonization Society had been attempting to send freed slaves since James Monroe's first term as president. But despite a significant number of freedmen expressing interest in the voyage, few left for Africa, and several who did returned to the United States.[29] While the expatriates

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[24] Congress, Senate, Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States, *Report and Testimony of the Select Committee of the United States Senate to Investigate the Causes of the Removal of the Negroes from the Southern States to the Northern States*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1880. It is commonly referred to as Senate Report 693 and will later be cited as such.

[25] Painter, 137.

[26] Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 308.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Foner, 599.

[29] Ibid.

struggled to attain financial security just as they did in the South, the failure of colonization stemmed from the fact that the overwhelming majority of black Southerners had no interest in returning to their ancestral homelands, instead preferring to assert their citizenship and rights as Americans.[30] Although certainly not alone in his opposition to emigration of any kind, Frederick Douglass served as the most eloquent and influential black critic of those seeking to leave the South. He remarked during the Civil War, "It is settled that the negro is going to remain in the United States. That he is not fighting for fun, then wipe his hands of the Republic and go to another country when peace is proclaimed, but he is here to remain."[31] Over twenty months later, in September 1866, Douglass affirmed his earlier message, declaring the black man "is a permanent part of the American people. That he is here and that no scheme of colonization or no mode of extirpation can be adopted by which he shall be entirely eradicated from this land. He is here."[32] With the most prominent black leader in the nation criticizing the "scheme of colonization," and with most blacks not needing his disapproval to reject it themselves, the idea of a mass emigration to Africa died. Although blacks spurned Africa, their plight in the South remained untenable, and they continued to search for a new place to call home. By the late 1870s, Kansas appeared to be the best place to find the opportunities and rights denied them in the South.

As he had criticized the efforts to recolonize ex-slaves to Liberia immediately following the Civil War, Frederick Douglass delivered a paper in Sarasota, New York, on 12 September 1879—two years after the founding of Nicodemus but at the height of black migration—

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Frederick Douglass, "Black Freedom is the Prerequisite of Victory: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 13 January 1865," in *The Frederick Douglas Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. 4: 1864-80*, eds. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 57. Hereafter cited as *The Frederick Douglas Papers*.

[32] Frederick Douglass, "We Are Here and Want the Ballot-Box: An Address Delivered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 4 September 1866," in *The Frederick Douglas Papers*,129.

lambasting those who took part in the "exodus" from the South. Although the famous orator conceded to the migrants their citation of economic and social hardships endured in the South as their rationale for escaping the region, "it should be kept in mind that the way of oppressed people from bondage to freedom is never smooth."[33] But rather than leave behind the South, Douglass implored blacks to stay and fight for what the Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction were meant to achieve. Calling the exodus "ill-timed, and in some respects hurtful" because of the sacrifice of the progress which had been made over the previous fifteen years, he stated the mass migration "is necessarily an abandonment of the great and paramount principle of protection to person and property in every State of the Union. . . .The business of this nation is to protect its citizens where they are, not to transport them where they will not need protection."[34] Instead, he declared moving "should be a last resort," preferring that their large numbers in the South be used to form a bloc for political advancement. He further believed that "not only is the South the best locality for the negro on the ground of his political powers and possibilities, but it is best for him as a field of labor. He is there, as he is nowhere else, an absolute necessity. He has a monopoly of the labor market. His labor is the only labor which can successfully offer itself for sale in that market."[35] Douglass's convictions prompted him to declare "the Exodus will prove a disappointment, a mistake and a failure."[36]

Douglass's skepticism of the exodus's necessity is understandable when taking into account he presented this paper a mere two years after the Compromise of 1877 brought Reconstruction to an end. At this point in Southern history, the trend of disintegrating racial relations might not have been readily apparent to outsiders. To illustrate this point, the

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[33] Frederick Douglass, "The Negro Exodus from the Gulf States: A Paper Read in Saratoga, New York, on 12 September 1879," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 519.

[34] Ibid., 524; 526.

[35] Ibid., 526; 528; 529.

[36] Ibid., 528.

abolitionist and Union commander Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Sir George Campbell of Great Britain had traveled the South around this same period and observed that the white Southern man's racial attitudes had been liberalized since the end of the Civil War. Nevertheless, certainly Douglass, as well as Higginson and Campbell, must have understood the gravity of the freedman's situation given the interest roused by colonization efforts to Liberia and the Kansas movement that developed as an outgrowth of Liberia fever. When so many blacks sought to escape the South, it is perplexing that Douglass and others encouraged them to stay and assert their rights that were denied them when they could leave for Kansas and exercise their rights as citizens with virtually no difficulty.

Disregarding the critics, large numbers decided to try and make new lives on the Great Plains. Kansas certainly possessed alluring qualities that neither Liberia nor the Redeemed South could match. The relatively new state had fought the Civil War on the side of the Union, and Kansans were generally liberal on matters of race relations. Although the winter and summer climates could reach extremes to which the migrants were unaccustomed, the agents responsible recruiting freedmen and their families failed to tell them that life on the high plains could be difficult to endure at times. Nevertheless, most importantly for these sharecroppers, Kansas had plentiful amounts of land available through the Homestead Act of 1862, providing the opportunity to own land and gain economic independence for the first time in their lives. At the beginning of the 1870s, blacks from Missouri were the primary immigrants into Kansas, but by the middle part of the decade, an influx of blacks from the border states of Kentucky and Tennessee became the primary source for the increasing black population.[37]

[37] Painter, 146-147.

One of the most instrumental black men in luring members of his race to the Plains was Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, who, along with Henry Adams, no longer believed blacks could find happiness and prosperity within the confines of Dixie.[38] After having first made inquiries into Kansas immediately following the Civil War, Singleton left his home in Tennessee and personally investigated southern Kansas in 1873 and, finding it to be "good country" and "congenial to our nature," he pooled his resources to purchase one thousand acres of land.[39] When Singleton returned to his home state, he put all of his efforts into promoting Kansas, sending advertising circulars not only throughout the South but across the entire United States. In 1876 and 1877, his exertions began to bear fruit as blacks left Tennessee for Kansas, with colonies created in Cherokee County in southeast Kansas and Singleton's own colony in Morris County in the central part of the state. As the man who initiated the movement that developed into the black "exodus" from the South in 1879, Singleton took to describing himself as the "Father of the Kansas emigration," and others came to describe him as that, as well.[40] Despite his self-proclaimed title, Singleton intended to bring the colonists back to the South once conditions improved. Included in the Senate's report on the exodus, he testified, "We don't want to leave the South, and just as soon as we have confidence in the South I am going to be an instrument in the hands of God to persuade every man to go back, because that is the best country; that is genial to our nature, we love that country, and it is the best country in the world for us; but we are going to learn the South a lesson."[41]

Yet while "Pap" Singleton viewed Kansas as a land for blacks to settle temporarily until white Southerners realized they could not do without their colored brethren, there existed a group

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[38] Ibid., 108.
[39] "Pap" Singelton, Senate Report 693, vol. III, 380.
[40] Painter, 117.
[41] "Pap" Singleton, Senate Report 693, vol. III, p. 383.

of men who, drawn to Kansas as a result of Singleton's promotions of it, envisioned the state to be a new and permanent home for blacks who would settle there. This group was comprised of speculators sought only profits from land sales. Because of this fact, some contend they did not share Singleton's motivation to lead Southern blacks away from oppression.[42] Comprised of seven men—six of whom were black—the group of developers led by Reverend S. P. Roundtree and W. R. Hill, the lone white man, incorporated the Nicodemus Town Company in April 1877.[43]

Many of the black migrants possessed financial means of support to begin their new life. In Singleton's appearance before the Senate, he testified, "I prohibited my people leaving their country going there without they had money—some money to start with and go on with a while."[44] Those who came to Nicodemus were meant to be no different. Besides having to pay a five dollar fee to make the trip, the Nicodemus Company sought individuals who had the capital to create and support local businesses. But this was almost never the case; money was practically nonexistent among a people who had spent their lives in bondage and then had to contend with the unfair sharecropping system. These pioneering blacks did not have the money to buy critical supplies, including food, much less the ability to invest in the town's welfare.

Nevertheless, an initial group of some 350 colonists from the Lexington, Kentucky, area paid their deposit and headed west to Kansas with W. R. Hill and the Baptist preacher Reverend

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[42] Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, "The Settlement of Nicodemus: Its Origins and Early Promotion," in *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas*, ed. Gregory D. Kendrick (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1986), 1.

[43] Ibid., 2. The namesake of the town is a matter of some debate. While some believe that it was named after Nicodemus, the disciple whom Jesus visited in the middle of the night, the more accepted view is that Nicodemus was named for an African prince who was enslaved and brought to the West Indies. It is believed that when he was taken against his will, he told his captors that they would one day greatly regret enslaving the African race.

[44] "Pap" Singleton, Senate Report 693, vol. III, 380.

Morris Bell. These former slaves, who once needed passes to travel, utilized the most modern transportation of the day. Traveling by steamboat to Kansas City, the group then proceeded by train from there to Ellis, Kansas, thirty-five miles south of their final destination. It was in Ellis that they received their first opportunity "to enjoy their first real freedom" while white residents in the town worked quickly to provide shelter.[45] Only after trekking another two days by horseback and foot did they come upon the land Hill had picked for them.[46] On September 17, 1877, the group settled along the banks of the north fork of the Solomon River in western Kansas, becoming the first residents of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus represented a fresh opportunity for its settlers to reassert control over their own lives. The promise of a reconstructed, racially-harmonized South in which former slaves could participate in the political process and make a living on their own land created in them and Radical Republicans a sense of optimism that they could thrive once unshackled from the bonds of slavery. The promise faded, however, as Southerners worked to redeem the Old South from the start of Reconstruction and Northerners, exhausted with the sectional battles, reneged on the promise altogether by conceding white supremacy in the South in exchange for the presidency in 1877. Burdened with financial oppression as a result of the unfair sharecropping system and terrorized for seeking equality, blacks were forced to seek refuge outside of the South. The restriction of rights and other forms of harassment simply made life there untenable. As a result of the drudgeries of Southern life, the organizers of Nicodemus found many blacks eager to flee the South for Kansas. Regardless of the profit motives some contend were behind the plans of

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[45] "First Colony," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, Graham County Historical Society (GCHS), Hill City, KS. Lulu Sadler Craig, living from 1868 to 1971, came to Nicodemus and served as a school teacher there during the 1890s before moving to Colorado. Beginning in the 1930s, she began collecting information on the town's history in order to write a book. Although the book was never written, the notes she left behind, including her correspondence with several individuals, provide a valuable source of information.

[46] Lulu Craig, "Book manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

Nicodemus's leaders, the idea of an all-black town appealed to ex-slaves who realized this could be a place for them to make a better life. Although not as far from the racist South as Liberia, the largely unsettled high plains offered an isolated spot to freely assert their American citizenship.

In September 1877, the colonists who settled Nicodemus had the bravery to escape to a foreign territory and possessed the means to do so. While some arrived, disapproved of the area, and chose to return to their original homes, most settlers were fiercely determined to exploit the opportunity to enjoy full economic and political freedom. The new hope after the Civil War that Southern blacks—and blacks in other regions of the nation, as well—would become equal citizens was never realized as Reconstruction progressed, but it had been resurrected among the new residents of Nicodemus. Ready to begin their experience on the Great Plains of western Kansas, their revived hopes would be severely tested.

CHAPTER TWO

FAITH AND DETERMINATION

When undertaking the journey from Kentucky to Kansas, the colonists placed their trust in their religious leaders. The importance of faith among the new residents could not be understated. Morris Bell, a Baptist preacher in Lexington, helped W. R. Hill, a white man, organize the first colony.[1] Although Bell did not make the journey himself, the Reverend Simon Roundtree led by example, serving as the first person to stake a claim in the community. Not one of those who chose to settle rather than return to Kentucky failed to attend his sermons.[2] Pastors led subsequent groups to the new town, and they wielded tremendous influence. Along with gambling houses, saloons were banned as houses of immorality, and idleness was frowned upon as it increased the likelihood of trouble.[3] The first priority when the colonists arrived was organizing a church. Meeting irregularly at Reverend Roundtree's home for services until the following spring, spiritual direction provided a sustenance which these religious pioneers required for survival. Contrasted with the boorish behavior of the nearby towns of Webster and Stockton,[4] each of which permitted gambling and frequently experienced drunken brawls, Nicodemus's religious leaders provided a foundation for the town to be a paragon of virtue and for an industrious, moral people to enjoy success.

While the religious aspect of the town received priority, what to focus on after that in order to promote the town became a matter of debate. Starting a new community from nothing was no easy task regardless of what region the founders chose to settle. Arriving on the Great

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[1] "First Colony," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[2] Amy Beecher, "The Religious History of Kansas," 7, Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Webster sat about five miles to the east of Nicodemus. Stockton also lays to the east, nearly fifteen miles away from the all-black town.

Plains at the beginning of autumn, however, compounded the difficulties. These first settlers were not entirely devoid of monetary means, but the nearest stores were no less than fifteen miles away, making it difficult to secure supplies. As a result, the settlers lacked sufficient quantities of provisions to get them through the winter. As the circular promoting Nicodemus said, "There is some timber; plenty for fire use, while we have no fear but what we will find plenty of coal,"[5] the dearth of trees forced the settlers underground to live in dugouts for the first few months in Kansas. While the closest thing to coal on the High Plains was animal refuse, the timber supply was sufficient to withstand the brutal cold these people were unaccustomed to. Despite an adequate supply of firewood, the first winter proved to be brutal. Having pictured a place not unlike Kentucky, "None of the settlers had any idea what frontier life was like," wrote one resident to Lulu Craig. Nevertheless, "the majority of immigrants were of a sturdy type and stayed hoping and waiting for success . . . they were full of faith."[6]

Although a people of faith, their unhappiness with their location and what surrounded them prompted an attempt to bring God's fury upon W. R. Hill, the only white man associated with the effort to establish Nicodemus. There is little dispute that Hill, a land speculator, had a penchant for unscrupulous behavior if it meant earning himself a profit.[7] From surviving accounts, it appears that many immigrants believed Hill had robbed them of their old homes and five dollars. Indeed, one resident later retold a story in which the first colony arrived and "they were extremely disappointed in what they found and became violently angry with Mr. Hill. They decided to hang him." Hill sought refuge fifteen miles west in what would become Hill City. The

[5] "To the Colored Citizens of the United States," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[6] "On the Frontier," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[7] Hill City *People's Reveille*, 15 April 1897. While suspected of conniving business practices as a young man, the law finally caught up with Hill when the United States government charged him with fraudulent land transactions. The article says Hill worked with a "colored notary public at Kansas City" to acquire lands by forged affidavits. "A large number of ignorant colored people, whom Hill engaged in his transactions to carry out the requirements of the homestead law, appeared as witnesses at the trial today."

mob pursued him, but friends of Hill's covered him under a wagonload of hay and transported him past Nicodemus to Stockton, thirty miles to Hill City's east.[8] This story has been verified by several sources, including the daughter of the man who secured Hill's escape, but Hill must have eventually made amends with the Nicodemus residents for they later became important allies in his bid for his town to become the county seat.

Choosing to forget Hill's seemingly duplicitous actions, those in Nicodemus turned their attention to avoiding the brunt of what winter could bring. As a result of Hill and other organizers failing to mention the harsh climate in their promotional efforts, the settlers were unprepared for the reality of a cold, Arctic air mass. But along with faith, they had a community spirit in which all worked together. In W. L. Sayers' brief account of Nicodemus's history, written in 1932 for the *Bogue Messenger*, he said "with pick and spade they dug out caves in the dry ground, covered them with brush and dirt, named them dugouts, and moved their families in. And what a home for human occupation,—unplastered dirt walls and ceilings, unvarnished dirt floors!"[9] And although such a dwelling may have seemed unappealing to people who have never experienced the ignominy of living underground, the settlers took pride in their dugouts, for Sayers explained "these homes were occupied by owners and not by tenants. . . . Many of these colonists had never owned a home and no doubt felt a glow of pride upon being settled with his family beneath his own roof, even if it was a dirt roof."[10] Women took great pride in the upkeep of a dugout, including sweeping the dirt floors.

With their homes completed and now sheltered from the harsh elements of the region, the residents turned their focus to surviving the winter. Grave concerns about acquiring enough warm clothing and accumulating enough food to get them safely through the winter abounded

[8] *Hill City Times*, 22 August 1940.
[9] W. L. Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue Messenger*, 25 February 1932.
[10] Ibid.

among the colonists. In an effort to heat their dugouts, settlers often used a greased rag lighted by sparks from flintrocks in place of kerosene.[11] Sustenance was apparently hard to come by, for on the first Christmas three months after settlement, the community lacked food for a feast and markets in Ellis and Stockton were too far away to buy anything. As a result, the town's leaders bought wild turkeys from nearby Wild Horse township to celebrate.[12] Until the following spring when gardens could be planted, however, finding an adequate supply of food proved to be a daunting chore. Only by receiving the charity of Osage Indians returning from a hunt in the Rocky Mountains, as well as assistance from white residents in eastern Kansas to whom the settlers appealed, did the residents survive.[13]

A later history of the town written for the *Denver Post*, however, disputes the notion that whites generously aided the black settlers. Robert Fenwick wrote that Nicodemus residents received little support from whites because whites were often in the same predicaments and thus had nothing extra to give, especially to a race that, according to one particular historian, white people in Kansas "resented."[14] In the brief histories left behind by settlers, not one mentions the resentment among whites which the *Post* reporter, who cited unnamed historians, claimed. On the contrary, numerous residents cited the invaluable assistance of whites during the formative years of Nicodemus's existence. There are undoubtedly examples of racism, but to claim that prosperous whites refused to aid blacks only until they also fell on difficult times would be to ignore several separate accounts to the contrary.

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[11] *Hill City Times*, 29 September 1966.

[12] "The First Christmas, 1877," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS. In addition to the turkeys for food, these deeply religious people put all of their energies into celebrating the birth of their savior. Children received homemade gifts of stone toys or rag dolls. They sang carols Christmas night after the prayer service, realizing "that only happiness, love, deep gratitude, and a little humility should be in the minds and hearts" at this season of the year. As one settler said of the holiday, "It was a jolly time and everyone was happy." The only thing lacking, due to a lack of timber, was a Christmas tree. The first one was not put up until 1882.

[13] Hamilton, 8; Lulu Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[14] *Denver Post*, 17 October 1965.

They were not wholly dependent upon the charity of outsiders. The example of Mrs. Groebles dividing "her private amount of flour to keep the people from starving" demonstrates that Nicodemus residents helped each other whenever they had anything to spare.[15] From accounts told to Lulu Craig, health remained generally good among inhabitants, but unsanitary conditions and malnutrition's effects had become evident by springtime. When children contracted whooping cough, Henry Wilson recalled that they "were treated with a tea made from sheep manure."[16] While everyone managed to survive the winter, the suffering "mentally and physically" left an indelible memory on the community for years to come.[17]

The arrival of spring brought a new colony to Nicodemus. Led by W. R. Hill and Reverend Daniel Hickman, a group of three hundred arrived from Kentucky in March 1878. To the dismay of many in this group, the townsite was not located in the midst of a land of milk and honey as had been advertised. Indeed, it was desolate. In one of the most famous stories regarding Nicodemus's early heritage, Reverend Hickman's wife Williana recounted her first memory of the town:

> When we got in sight of the Nicodemus settlement, some of the men shouted, 'There's Nicodemus.' I looked everywhere but I could see nothing but some smoke coming from the ground. I said, 'Where's Nicodemus?' Someone answered, 'That's it, where the dugouts are.' The scenery was not beautiful in any way, and such a wave of homesickness came over me that I began to cry.[18]

She was not the only one distraught at what they had found after such a long journey. "About sixty families . . . went back [to Kentucky] the next day after landing in Nicodemus," led by head deacon Stythe Howard, who apologized to Reverend Hickman for the women crying all night,

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[15] "Mrs. L. J. Wilson to Lulu Craig," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[16] *Hill City Times*, 29 September 1966.

[17] "The First Winter, 1877-8," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[18] "Second colony," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS. Mrs. Hickman stayed in Nicodemus with her husband, but ultimately settled fourteen miles west, and only two and a half miles due north of Hill City. The Hickmans lived there for twenty years and she says, "We saw [Nicodemus] grow, watched its many changes. It was our fondest hope." Reverend Hickman established several churches in nearby Bogue and Hill City, preaching the first sermon in the latter town.

“and if we do not go away we will probably have to send them to the asylum.”[19] Along with the Hickmans, however, the overwhelming majority of blacks chose to stay on the land despite the duplicity of the town’s promoters; largely because they wanted to, and partly because they could not afford to return to Kentucky.

Blacks in Kansas—not just those in Nicodemus—found it difficult to obtain employment at this time. For those in Nicodemus who wished to farm but had arrived too late to plant, they sought any line of work which would help put food on the table during this period of struggle. Most of the male immigrants performed low-skill tasks by working for the railroad at Ellis, helping other area farmers with their harvests, and helping ranchers in the cattle industry. The contributions of the community’s women cannot be overlooked, either. Women of practically all ages contributed to the family income by assisting other families with domestic chores, and they tended to the needs at home while the men were away earning wages.[20] The importance of women to the community’s survival could not possibly be overstated.

The dawn of springtime not only brought more settlers to Nicodemus, but it also brought renewed vigor among the residents to organize the community and bring prosperity to the town. In a community led by ministers, the first order of business was to build a public house of worship rather than continue to hold services in Reverend Simon Roundtree’s home. In the first months of 1878, Thomas Johnson, a deacon, created another dugout to be used solely for worship before a stone structure could be built for the First Baptist Church in 1880.[21] In the succeeding year of 1879, the American Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church was founded, but

[19] Ibid.

[20] *Hays Daily News*, 7 February 1984; “Others Came Also,” Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[21] “Culture of Colonists,” Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

congregants held irregular services for the following six years until their permanent home was constructed.[22]

Nicodemus's focus on erecting a church was hardly unique for a black community. Prior to the Civil War, in both the North and South, a church was the one of the few places blacks could gather and express themselves without white oversight. After Appomattox, the church's importance did not decline. For blacks throughout the nation, from Philadelphia to Mobile, a church served as the center for cultural and social development for congregants. In Kansas, blacks in predominantly white towns like Lawrence, Topeka, Emporia, and Wichita constructed First Baptist, Second Baptist, and A.M.E. congregations to meet their needs.[23] In addition to tending to spiritual needs, the church sponsored reading and music lessons, social events, such as dances and picnics, and also charity drives for those in want.[24]

The next item on the agenda was to organize a school system. "School was a paramount issue . . . after food and shelter were secured. No one wished to establish his home where there was no access to schools, church nor other civilizing influences," said one community member.[25] In Kansas, an 1858 law ensured blacks access to education, and the compulsory law of 1872 required that children between ages six and sixteen, regardless of their skin color, receive basic education.[26] Erecting a school proved to be more of a challenge than one might expect. When Reverend Roundtree and his colony had arrived the previous fall, the preacher ardently advocated the importance of literacy for the success of the people. When he broached the idea for a school, however, area ranchers who did not have children outnumbered the still-small community and voted down the building of a schoolhouse on the grounds that they did not want

[22] Ibid.
[23] *Hays Daily News*, 9 February 1984.
[24] Ibid.
[25] "Keber Schools," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[26] "Nicodemus School Students," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

to pay more taxes to support it.[27] As a result, Nicodemus children received their education from Mrs. Elch, who taught classes in the A.M.E. church during 1878.[28] Yet Reverend Myers of the A.M.E. Church assumed leadership on the issue, and the whole town met with anxiety "to see a school started in the community and agreed to help support it."[29] Only when Hickman's reinforcements completed their migration from Kentucky, though, did the community have a majority of voters to approve the establishment a school. The founding of a public school provided an incentive for prospective emigrants back in Kentucky and other Southern regions, but more importantly, the generation that was born into slavery and received minimal education overcame selfish ranchers and a poor tax base to offer their children a more formal education.

Once a public school was established in early 1879, the community's leaders incorporated Graham County's first school district. Despite this triumph, Nicodemus struggled to maintain and manage the school for no one had extensive knowledge about taxation and curriculum to support it. Teachers received meager salaries—in 1886, Ms. Nettie Craig earned a mere $23 for five months of work before quitting—and the efforts exerted to keep alive the primary school left the opportunity for a high school to be seized later by Bogue, some four miles to the west.[30] School terms began in July (after the wheat harvest so children could help their fathers), and despite having to sit on the floor without any supplies but a few books shared among the pupils, the school became well-organized under dedicated teachers. Nevertheless, it took thirty-three years before the first Nicodemus eighth grader, Cecil Scott, matriculated to

[27] "Keber Schools," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[28] "Free Methodists and School," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[29] "Nicodemus School Organized, July 1879," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[30] "Nicodemus School District," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS; "Nettie Craig, Teacher, 1886," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

Bogue High School, where most students from Nicodemus would later go for their secondary studies.[31]

Just as the church served more than just spiritual needs, a school represented more than just an education. It signified the upward mobility of blacks. In the Antebellum South, laws prohibited education for slaves. To avoid prosecution, benevolent whites usually instructed one or two slaves at a time. Braver whites, however, openly challenged the laws by establishing schools for blacks, and despite the ramifications, schools could be found throughout the South.[32] After the Civil War, a schoolhouse in the South was considered among blacks as the first evidence of their independence, and they expended large sums of money to provide for education in the war's aftermath.[33] Whereas obtaining a decent education in the South became increasingly difficult due to poorly trained teachers and then the dismantling of public education altogether following Redemption,[34] the leaders of black communities everywhere concocted methods to educate their children. Nicodemus was no different, for the adults had provided the foundation for their children to acquire knowledge which would benefit them beyond the land on which they worked alongside their parents. For the younger generation huddled in the new school, the future seemed bright in northwest Kansas.

The future of Nicodemus, however, remained in doubt up through 1879. As one unidentified member of the colony explained, "Frontier life is hard at its best, but harder where no natural resources exist; as was the condition on the treeless prairie, where wood, plenty of water, wild fruits and game were lacking."[35] Throughout much of 1878, the people still struggled

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[31] "Nicodemus School Organized, July 1879," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS. The following year, in 1913, the first girl, Ethel Sayers, passed the eighth grade before going to Hill City to attend high school.

[32] Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 200-201.

[33] Foner, 97-98.

[34] Ibid., 99; 589.

[35] "Pioneer Life," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

to find not only work in nearby towns, but also an adequate supply of food. Residents continued to solicit donations of food and money from persons in eastern Kansas, and white passers-by aided in cultivating land in return for lodging for the night. New colonists brought with them some wealth and farm implements to till the land, but it was still not enough.[36] The people relied on what their gardens could produce, and along with pigs and chickens, the pioneers averted disaster by starvation in 1878. As if to add to the distress of this first year, an earthquake strong enough to knock items off shelves struck one evening in October of that year.[37] The suffering endured by these pioneers had to have made them question whether or not western Kansas was the proper place to enjoy their freedom! If they did have doubts, no records of them survive; for better or for worse, Nicodemus was home. To illustrate this point, the unidentified person again noted that despite the travails of living on the unforgiving High Plains, "Pioneer life developes [sic] the qualities of independence, resourcefulness, and courage, in one. Having only himself to lean on and depend upon, he learns new methods of approach to any condition that confronts him."[38]

The turning point for the town's prospects might have come with the election of new leadership in the summer of 1878. John Niles, a primary solicitor of aid during this period of need, was elected president of the Nicodemus Town Company, and Edward P. McCabe became secretary.[39] Niles had befriended A. T. Hall of Leavenworth and lured him to the west, where Hall became instrumental in organizing land claims as the town's clerk.[40] Hall, who possessed a keen intellect, interceded on behalf of the colonists with the land office in Kirwin to organize

[36] Hamilton, 8.
[37] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS, 16. Nicodemus is located in the neighborhood of the Palco fault line, which still produces minor earthquakes in northwest Kansas in the present day.
[38] "Pioneer Life," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[39] Hamilton, 9.
[40] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS, 12.

homestead claims. This was critical, for the Homestead Act passed in the midst of the Civil War required the people huddled together in town to begin cultivating the land or risk losing it to outsiders. As a result of Hall's efforts, most everyone in the community hurriedly moved from the camp and onto the lands they claimed and began improving it as stipulated by the Homestead Act. Lulu Craig's correspondents reported, "within a few weeks, the townsite was virtually without inhabitants."[41] This development was not to be lamented. Rather, these migrants came to Kansas for the very reason of owning and working their own land and reaping what they grew, a privilege denied them back home in Kentucky. Some area whites, however, attempted to prevent the black settlers from acquiring their homesteads. In accounts given to newspapers in the twentieth century, claims of hostile whites emerge, such as when settlers were first staking land claims and ranchers called "nightriders" drove cattle through the area in an effort to discourage further expansion.[42] Blacks, having faced more serious intimidation prior to Kansas, remained undeterred, and the "nightriders" ceased activity when it became apparent that the black farmers would not leave.

These new Kansas farmers not only enjoyed being the masters of their own labors, but the new claims, while seemingly abandoning the Nicodemus settlement, finally brought "a bona fide community spirit" in which "each man traded work with his fellow, union church services were held, and organization of some sort was broached."[43] In a region where summer heat or insects or any other calamity could ruin a season's crops, beginning with the 1879 harvests, the immediate future of Nicodemus was secured through timely rains producing "bumper crops of almost everything which had been planted."[44] In addition to the success of the crops in the fields,

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[41] Ibid., 13.
[42] *Hutchinson News*, 6 November 1983.
[43] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS, 14.
[44] Ibid.

cultivated gardens spawned a variety of produce, including string beans, watermelons, cabbage, turnips, and potatoes as settlers adjusted to growing what the unforgiving Plains would permit.[45]

Nicodemus may have been temporarily uninhabited as most everyone rushed to establish a farm, but the community filled in with the appearance of proprietors seeking to provide for the agricultural economy. With the town seemingly past its struggles and on the road to prosperity, Nicodemus residents presented a petition requesting township organization to the commissioners of Rooks County, who possessed administrative oversight over the yet-unorganized Graham County.[46] As required by law, the petition had the signatures of twenty-five registered voters from the community, and the Rooks County sheriff called for an election of township officers to be held in December 1879.[47] Despite enduring harrowing conditions, the black pioneers remarkably incorporated Nicodemus before the close of the 1870s.

Its status as an official town gained the attention of entrepreneurs. Over the course of the next few years, two general stores, multiple hotels, and other businesses opened to accommodate not only the local residents, but also travelers passing by in need of provisions or a place to sleep. Artisans brought to the bustling village skills in masonry, carpentry, and plastering. William Scott opened a blacksmith shop in 1879 and did his work in a dugout.[48] Perhaps most important to a town dependent on the agricultural economy was the establishment of the Firmis Mill north of Nicodemus, the operation of which ended the need for residents to make the journey to Stockton or Ellis for meal and flour to be made out of the corn and wheat.[49]

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[45] "Food Conditions After 1883," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[46] Glen Schwendemann, *Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon* (Topeka, KS: State of Kansas Commission on Civil Rights, 1971, 16.

[47] Ibid., 17. Nicodemus remained an incorporated town until the Great Depression of the 1930s, when a steep decline in population stripped it of such status.

[48] "The First Blacksmith Shops," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[49] "Others Came Also," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

The attraction of such businessmen and artisans proved to the residents of Nicodemus that their community was on the verge of boom times. In other boom towns in Kansas, particularly the cattle towns, which included, among others, Abilene, Wichita, and Dodge City, the promising economic outlook for a town could lure many persons with necessary skills. Doctors, barbers, pharmacists, lawyers, and others arrived on Main Street and marketed themselves to customers.[50] Nicodemus, though, had two distinct differences from these other bustling towns. The first difference is that the cattle towns had saloons and other sundry establishments whereas Nicodemus's moral code prohibited such cabals. The second difference was that the cattle towns were often deserted for all but the few months of the year when cowboys drove their herds from Texas to Kansas, but Nicodemus's agricultural economy required artisans to sell their skills throughout the year.[51] Nevertheless, Nicodemus was not terribly different from other towns enjoying boom times or were on the cusp of doing so. Businessmen saw in it a potential for success, and they moved in to be the first to capitalize.

Z. T. Fletcher owned a general store, but he also served in a capacity of great import: Fletcher ran the post office inside his store, serving as one of the few black postmasters in the nation. As often as he could, and sometimes through inclement weather, he went to Ellis to pick up the community's correspondence and packages from the east. So important were these items considered to be that Fletcher's wife, when delivering mail to those who could not make it to the store, would carry mail in her apron's pocket "for safety while out of the office."[52] Protecting a piece of mail sent to this isolated hamlet was apparently not a responsibility to be taken lightly. Despite the understandably sporadic service as a result of the distance between the two towns,

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[50] Robert Dykstra, *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 96.
[51] Ibid., 86.
[52] "Mrs. L. J. Wilson to Lulu Craig," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

those in Nicodemus took great pride in their post office and held Fletcher in high esteem for the sacrifices he made to serve them.

The difficulty of Fletcher's trips to Ellis may have garnered him respect, but the haphazard service also demonstrated the importance of securing a railroad through Nicodemus. Merchants and other businessmen in need of supplies and merchandise also had to retrieve their goods from Ellis. From the notes she compiled, Lulu Craig explains in her manuscript that "There was no regular supply line at that time. Men passing across the country from North to South—from Norton or Phillips Counties would carry supplies." Not until after 1882 did a greater demand for supplies require "a regular line of transportation" to be established. Even with teams of oxen making the trip, "two days or longer were required to make the distance between Ellis and Nicodemus."[53] Managing to overcome difficult odds, Nicodemus was on the verge of boom times, but the importance of the railroad could not be understated in preventing a boom from turning into a bust. The settlers were aware of this, and spent nearly a decade trying to lure a track to be placed beside the town.

While goods came at erratic intervals, the black settlement continued to prosper well into the 1880s. Despite a haven for ex-slaves, the business opportunities presented by the now-bustling town drew white proprietors. Fred Wright and Edd Palmer were two of the more prominent entrepreneurs who opened shops among eleven white men listed by one resident.[54] In 1884, another white man, A. L. McPherson, was so impressed with Nicodemus's commercial activity that he took the gamble of opening a bank when many in town expressed doubts that it could be supported.[55] While there is no direct evidence pertaining to the feelings of the town's

[53] "Freighters," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS. The length of such trips were cut in half only when the railroads reached Stockton and Bogue in the early and mid-1880s.

[54] "The First Stores," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[55] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

blacks towards these men, there are no indications that these whites were viewed with any suspicion. In fact, from all accounts, their businesses enjoyed frequent patronage. Likewise, there is nothing to suggest these white businessmen held any racial feelings which resulted in acrimony, which would, after all, be bad business. These white proprietors were important in helping build the town, and white men Sidney Palmer and John Wright dug the first communal well in late 1879 to provide not only sanitary water instead of what was drawn from the Solomon River, but it also saved time and labor carrying the water from the river to town.[56] Although Nicodemus appears to have been initially a location for racial harmony, incidents in the coming years suggest that whites in western Kansas were not as liberal as the settlers had hoped.

With the establishment of a church, a school, and homesteads for those who wanted to work the land, and the arrival of successful proprietors, the town had achieved a solid foundation on which to build. In the early 1880s, immigration had slowed dramatically. In fact, the last large number of blacks arrived to make Nicodemus their home in March and April of 1879. Among these new arrivals, some from Mississippi quickly irritated their fellow citizens with claims of impoverishment even though "it was soon noticeable all of them had sufficient cash to purchase necessities at Fletcher's general store."[57] One can only imagine the ire this raised among the first settlers who had actually endured severe food shortages and even an earthquake in their first year in Kansas. While these blacks from Mississippi are not mentioned again by Craig or anyone else, feigning desperation surely did not win acceptance among their new neighbors. In time, though, everyone who put forth effort in working the land and improving the town was embraced by the close-knit community.

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[56] "Autumn 1879, Water," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[57] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS, 45.

Taking pride in how far Nicodemus had come in a little more than two years of existing on the Plains, settlers celebrated Emancipation Day for the first time on August 1, 1880. The idea had come from a group of Leavenworth emigrants who formed the Benevolent Society to make improvements to the town through volunteering time and money.[58] The first day of August held significance because it was the day the British West Indies abolished slavery in 1834.[59] Their own emancipation had brought them to a new state where they started new homes and formed a vibrant community. According to Ola Wilson, the town's founding is not celebrated because "there was too much pain associated with that, too much robbery by the white man over people who couldn't read or write."[60]

When Beverly Herring gained freedom in Kentucky after the war, he and his fellow slaves celebrated, some even dropping "down on their knees right there to pray and thank God for deliverance." He explained the euphoria quickly wore off, however, when they realized they no longer knew what to do or where to be. He was, therefore, among the first colonists to come to Nicodemus. Despite the hardships endured in east Graham County, Herring said, "I have never wished to return to the plantation."[61] Others, of course, could not withstand the tribulations the Plains wrought and returned to Kentucky, but most persevered with the help of strong religious beliefs and a desire to succeed in their first endeavors of true freedom. Carrying with them the memories of subjugation at the hands of whites both before and after emancipation,

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[58] "The First of August," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS. The Benevolent Society was the first fraternal order in Graham County, and it claimed hundreds of members in the area, both men and women. Although Emancipation Day is its lasting accomplishment, the order was responsible for building the first public hall in Nicodemus and assisting in building structures on farms. The society's success paved the way for new orders to form. Among the social societies that would be established included several men's societies, from the Knights of Pythias, Court of Calanthe, Odd Fellow Lodge, to even a Masonic Lodge, as well as a women's-only Order of the Eastern Star.

[59] "First Settlers," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS. Emancipation Day is still celebrated to this day, now commonly referred to as "Homecoming," held over the last weekend of July.

[60] *Kansas City Times*, 2 August 1965.

[61] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS, 20.

these blacks held an attitude that they could indeed be successful without white oversight. While the notion that blacks were mentally inferior to whites had become en vogue in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the colonists of Nicodemus determined to prove wrong this supremacist belief.

The success of Nicodemus in light of the difficulties they had to endure is nothing short of astounding. They had left the South for an entirely different region in terms of geography and climate. In fact, most colonists felt W. R. Hill betrayed them in his descriptions of the High Plains. In Kansas, W. L. Sayers later wrote,

> . . . the early settlers on the plains of Western Kansas were visited with all the plagues that were sent against the ancient Egyptians. They had the Indian scare and drought, hot winds and blizzards; and no one who has not been a citizen of the great prairie has any conception of what it meant 50 years and more ago to try to establish a home, engage in successful agricultural pursuits, raise a family and accumulate property during the terrible drouths [sic] that occasionally visited that country.[62]

But the residents of Nicodemus clung to the values which they held so dear fifteen hundred miles or so to the east. The most important building in the community was the church, and only after that was completed did the citizens move to build a public school and establish the town's economy. Faith was a requirement. The hardships suffered required a belief that God would deliver them from the constant miseries of hunger and inclement weather. The community's first leaders were pastors, who, true to their spiritual role, guided their flock through the difficult times. Just as it would be during the civil rights movement of the 1950s, religion provided strength to move forward despite overwhelming odds against them; the reality of living on the High Plains clashed with W. R. Hill's portrayal of it as Eden in Kansas.

Along with faith that God would bestow blessings upon them came the determination to earn those blessings. All but the youngest of children in the community had experienced life as a

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[62] Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue Messenger*, 25 February 1932.

piece of chattel. And as Beverly Herring said, no difficulties of any kind could get him to return to a plantation. Others in Nicodemus held the same sentiment. In addition to the former slaves who inhabited the town, numerous veterans of the Civil War, including postmaster and general store operator Z. T. Fletcher (as well as white men E. Lavelle and William Pence), also called it home. One account details ex-soldier Joseph Hones chastising a group of impolite youth by demanding a proper use of manners before concluding, "I fought to free you. I waded in blood knee deep for you at Antietam."[63] The opportunities Nicodemus provided were not to be taken for granted by anyone. In Nicodemus the men and women, "freed from the influence of overseers and owners, took their part in the making of this great state as it mounted the ladder on its path way to the stars."[64]

In a town full of ex-slaves and Civil War veterans who participated in some of the bloodiest battles of that war, they could not fail. At this point when areas farther west remained undeveloped, failure meant returning to the South, which would in turn be cause for whites to gloat and for the unsuccessful colonists to resume their subordinate positions in Southern culture. Only the faint of heart backtracked to Kentucky; the rest created a community that was an immense source of pride even to the present day. Life was undeniably difficult. Many of the original settlers were like Henry Wilson, who was uneducated and worked on a farm without shoes. But he said life was difficult for everyone, "and we helped each other." After accumulating enough money to buy a farm complete with cows after years of working for the railroads, Wilson said, "Man, that was living."[65] The people of Nicodemus did not need life to be easy. Rather, they needed their freedom and the opportunity to make their own way, two necessities denied to those they had left behind in the South.

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[63] "Civil War Veterans," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[64] Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue Messenger*, 3 March 1932.
[65] *Hill City Times*, 29 September 1966.

As the new decade dawned, Nicodemus had stabilized and emerged from the first harrowing years poised to become a key community in western Kansas. During the course of the 1880s, Nicodemus served host to plenty of travelers of "every class, condition, and profession" with stages loaded to their limit. The numbers were often so abundant that "often the hotel accommodations were not sufficient to care for all the travelers."[66] Nicodemus boomed in the decade after its founding, supporting multiple general stores, a blacksmith shop, hotels, several livery stables, and two implement dealers, and, for a brief period, two newspapers.[67] The *Atchison Daily Champion* had a writer visit the town in 1883, gushing that the town might fail but "the name will always recall the bravest attempt ever made by people of any color to establish homes in the high plains of Western Kansas."[68] In nearby Hill City, the newspaper *Hill City Reveille* also took note of their neighbor's success, calling Nicodemus "a very important trading point . . . Nicodemus is widely known throughout the state . . ." The account, which was reprinted in the Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, continued to heap praise:

> Strange to say, these people, many of whom were raised in slavery, are among the thriftiest, and most prosperous class of settlers in the great north west. . . . The colored inhabitants of this portion of the county, contrary to the erroneous ideas that have been impressed upon the minds of many of our eastern friends, are a clever, intelligent people and will some day figure as a strong political faction in western Kansas.[69]

They had staked their claim to their constitutional rights in western Kansas, and they resolved to exercise them freely. In the critical decade of the 1880s, those in Nicodemus were ready to shift their focus from their community's survival to the realities of their surrounding area and state. Their voice was to be heard—their political power not only determined what new

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[66] "Early Mail Service in Nicodemus," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[67] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 13 May 1886.

[68] *Hays Daily News*, 20 February 1972.

[69] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 9 December 1886. While the praise is undoubtedly warranted and likely an accurate depiction of Nicodemus residents, it will be seen that Hill City and another town, Millbrook, competed for votes in being awarded the privilege of being the county seat. The Hill City paper's flattery could not have hurt efforts to garner support from Nicodemus.

principality would become the seat of Graham County, but it also was responsible for the placement of prominent colored men in state offices. Unfortunately, though, racism could not be escaped, and it might have even played a role in dooming the prospering, bustling town. During the 1880s, as Nicodemus prospered and residents never missed an election, their fight for equality was far from over.

CHAPTER THREE

EQUALITY AND BIGOTRY

Chief among the reasons the Exodusters chose to settle in Kansas was its liberal positions on race. Rather than ignoring the need for blacks to be educated, the state legislature required blacks to attend school in the late 1850s.[1] In addition to access to education, Kansas further appealed to ex-slaves by offering political equality, an abundance of open land to be owned by anyone, economic opportunities, and a shelter from violence.[2] In Kentucky where freedmen were "finding themselves losing ground in connection with the franchise and the enjoyment of political rights,"[3] Kansas seemed to offer inclusion and enough open space to where, if necessary, the residents of Nicodemus could be isolated from whites.[4] In this community, participation in politics was a right to be both enjoyed and taken seriously after it had been denied them in the South even after the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Nevertheless, the racism of the South these blacks thought they had escaped still managed to rear its ugly head on the High Plains, as persons from neighboring towns expressed their disdain for the colored race in not-so-subtle terms. As a result, while those in Nicodemus played a crucial role in county politics and one of their own was elected to state office, several instances of bigotry provided important reminders to blacks that many white persons, even in liberal Kansas, did not care for the color of their skin.

Prior to repeated episodes of bigotry, however, Kansas offered itself as a haven from the terrorist threats blacks received if they merely entertained the notion of exercising their political rights. Free of such harassment, Nicodemus residents took their civic responsibilities seriously

[1] *Topeka Daily Capital*, 22 November 1953.
[2] Foner, 600.
[3] Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue Messenger*, 18 February 1932.
[4] Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979), xii.

and carried them out with great enthusiasm. With the establishment of Nicodemus, the freedmen "appreciated the opportunity to lie down safe in their dugouts and shanties and sleep at night undisturbed, free and happy. When they learned to use the ballot, they were prompt to vote."[5] The *Western Cyclone* described the importance of voting, writing, "The ballot is a weapon of a freeman. It blazes the pathway to a higher plane of civil liberty when men wielded it in the interest of real progress."[6]

Reading about the atrocities committed in the South, blacks in Nicodemus reaffirmed their commitment to being active participants in public debates. Like practically every other black person—even most of those in the South brave enough to cast a vote—they voted as a bloc for the Republican Party responsible for the great change in their estate. Should a black person not be a supporter of the Party of Lincoln, that person could face harsh criticism and ridicule. When Democrats chose D. B. Kelley, a black man from Leavenworth, to run for state auditor, the *Western Cyclone* rebuked the candidate:

> How any colored man can condescend to accept a nomination from the party that fought for four long years to perpetuate his bondage, not only in Kansas, but all south of the Mason and Dixon line, is a mystery we are unable to solve. In Kansas the [D]emocrats embrace the colored man and put him [on] their state ticket, yet they voice and echo the sentiments of the same party in the south who tolerate midnight mobs, organize the ku klux clans to murder in cold blood the colored citizens. We don't believe the scheme will capture a single vote in this section of the state.[7]

The assertion that D. B. Kelley would not earn the vote of those who shared his skin complexion was no empty threat. Not only did one observer who visited Nicodemus for the Emancipation celebration note, "There is not a Democratic voter in Nicodemus township,"[8] but a reader also joined the editor in questioning Kelley's loyalty to his race, writing,

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[5] "Political Status," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.
[6] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 1 June 1888.
[7] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 12 August 1886.
[8] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 19 August 1886.

> I cannot understand for the life of me how any colored man who remembers that ten, twelve, fifteen years ago when the question of emancipation and citizenship were up and the [D]emocratic party was upon one side and against our emancipation and citizenship with Republican party in favor of it. I can't see for the life of me how any colored man could side with the [D]emocratic party and against the [R]epublican party. The [D]emocratic party has not changed sufficiently to cause me to join that party.[9]

When the November election results were tallied, Kelley received a mere three out of the eighty-three cast in Nicodemus. The *Western Cyclone*, although relieved that blacks overwhelmingly voted for the Republican slate, including for the office of auditor, was highly critical of the three defectors who broke party ranks and voted for Kelley, saying, "We do not beleive [sic] that the colored vote will always be 'solid.' It will some time divide. When that time comes, the line will be drawn between those who vote from knowledge and conviction and those who vote in ignorance and for whiskey and other corrupt inducements."[10] In the following year of 1887, however, the *Western Cyclone* reported universal contentment with the GOP among blacks: "The colored citizens of Kansas, despite the efforts of the Democratic press and leaders to stir up strife and create dissensions among them, are quite well satisfied with the Republican party, as they should be; the Republican party of Kansas and the Nation, having never wavered in its fidelity to the race."[11]

Evidence of a crack in the wall of support for Republicans, however, was reported by the *Western Cyclone* over the course of the first half of 1888. In the preceding years, blacks had apparently grown increasingly alienated from the Republican platform and sought to have the issues important to them addressed. In March, the Nicodemus newspaper opposed a growing movement for a convention of the Colored Republicans of Kansas to demand representation at the national convention, arguing that whatever resolutions the renegade convention agreed to,

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[9] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 2 September 1886.
[10] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 4 November 1886.
[11] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 14 October 1887.

they would be ignored by the party as a whole.[12] A few months later, the *Western Cyclone* softened its stance against the Colored Republicans. "The convention of colored independents met at Lawrence last week and passed resolutions setting forth their grievances and future line of action. . . . While not accepting all the statements nor agreeing with the conclusions arrived at, we are free to say, open and above board that we must have a new deal. But we are willing that the deal be made by the [R]epublican party."[13] The newspaper went on to chastise the Republican leadership but pledged continued loyalty to the party, stating, "Certain leaders of the [R]epublican party will profit if they cease alluding to these independents as "coons" simply because they have taken this step. . . . at present as matters stand we are [R]epublican as opposed to democracy [sic] believing as we sincerely do that our party represents the progress, intelligence, and has at the best interest of our country."[14] Nevertheless, blacks were now questioning the ideals of the Great Emancipator's party, but at this point in history, no one in Nicodemus publicly renounced their allegiance to the Republicans.[15]

Despite wavering loyalty among some blacks later in the 1880s, those in Nicodemus were staunch Republicans, and with their newfound suffrage, they worked to aid the party of Lincoln. Having already organized their churches and school district, the organization of Nicodemus' political leadership developed quickly and well-attended town meetings were held frequently, and no one missed a vote for township offices without being subjected to criticism from their neighbors.[16] The freedmen took an interest not only in local government, but state government as

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[12] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 9 March 1888.

[13] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 8 June 1888.

[14] Ibid.

[15] The bonds to the GOP would prove strong among the ex-slaves and their children well into the twentieth century, as evidenced by Mrs. Emma R. Schnebly. Despite the entreaties of her daughter on behalf of Lyndon Johnson in the election of 1964, Schnebly remained resolute. "I never voted a Democrat ticket or anything that looked like one," but she also did not vote for Barry Goldwater, preferring to sit out the election. "96-Year-Old Daughter of Ex-Slaves Remains Loyal to Republican Party," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[16] "Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

well. A. T. Hall was appointed the deputy district clerk of Rooks County by Kansas Governor John St. John, and his responsibilities pertained to tending to affairs in the adjacent Graham County.[17] Before he returned to the eastern United States, he oversaw the county's first census as required for formal organization.[18] Hall left his mark on the area by not only playing an instrumental role in Graham County's establishment, but he was also the first resident of Graham County to hold office of any kind.[19] He was the first of many blacks hailing from Nicodemus to hold public positions.

The most prominent political figure to hail from Nicodemus, however, was E. P. McCabe. Coming from Illinois, where he first became involved in politics, he arrived in northwest Kansas, and with the broad support of both Nicodemus and Hill City residents, Governor St. John appointed him to serve as Graham County clerk in April, 1880.[20] McCabe's ambitions did not end there. He became the first black man elected to office in Kansas when the majority of Kansans voted him to be the state auditor in 1883.[21] He won re-election in 1885, and only when running for a third term in 1887 did the color of his skin become an issue. Several men, including one of color, mounted a challenge to McCabe's candidacy, on the grounds that a black man should not be allowed to serve three terms in office. McCabe garnered plenty of support, though, as an editorial in the *Ellis Review*, reprinted in the *Western Cyclone*, noted:

> Many of the papers throughout the state are making a fight on the re-election of State Auditor McCabe on account of color. This is not right. While we do not believe in the third-term system, yet if the other state officials are to enjoy that privilege, we see no reason why McCabe should not enjoy the same. There has been no more competent official at the capital than McCabe.[22]

[17] Crockett, 16.
[18] Ibid., 18.
[19] "The First Office in Graham County," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[20] Crockett, 18-19.
[21] *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 11 October 1991.
[22] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 27 May 1886.

The *Western Cyclone* concurred with the *Review* and made its own pitch on behalf of their hometown candidate, believing,

> It is a duty that the Republican party owe the colored voters that his name should go on the state ticket for a third time if this third term business is to be passed around to other men. If E. P. McCabe is colored, he has made just as efficient an officer as Sam. T. Howe, and deserves just as much favors at the hands of the next Republican state convention.[23]

Once again, the Nicodemus mouthpiece reprinted an editorial in the *Ellis Review* which questioned the motives of McCabe's challengers, particularly those of Tim McCarthy of Larned, and the newspaper begged voters, "Don't let color prejudice you."[24] Even with the turmoil surrounding his candidacy, McCabe commanded wide respect from several of the state's top newspapers which backed him to serve as an at-large delegate to the Republican convention in 1888.[25] Despite the broad support, however, McCabe withdrew his nomination at the convention in the name of party unity and urged his supporters to back another black candidate, John M. Brown of Shawnee County.[26]

One resident boasted, probably some time in the 1930s, that "Because of the location of Nicodemus in Graham County, the county has put into public office, more Negroes than all of the 104 Kansas counties combined."[27] Starting with A. T. Hall, Nicodemus residents held the trust of their neighbors—white or black—in positions of public responsibility. Up until the start of the Great Depression in the 1930s, there were several examples to give this statement legitimacy. Lewis Welton served as county commissioner, J. R. Hawkins held the position of

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 3 June 1886.

[25] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 2 March 1888.

[26] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 15 July 1888. McCabe later turned his attention to aiding blacks in Oklahoma where Jim Crow laws were in effect. He moved there with the ultimate goal of creating an all-black state from territory excised from Oklahoma, but this dream had no chance of becoming a reality. Instead, McCabe founded the all-black community of Langston and helped pick the site for all-black Langston University. In 1991, a portrait of McCabe was unveiled in the Kansas state capitol building, the first man of color to receive that honor for his contributions to state history.

[27] "First officers," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

district court clerk from 1886 until 1890, and George Jones, W. L. Sayers, and John Q. Sayers enjoyed a combined twelve years of service as attorney for Graham County.[28] Even when not serving the people, the ex-slaves in Nicodemus exhibited tremendous political influence in Graham County. Often enduring extreme verbal abuse on their character, residents remained steadfast in their determination to do what was in the best interests of all. For example, conflict arose over the selection of the permanent county seat, and those in Nicodemus played a vital role in the heated contest.

The war for the seat emerged between Millbrook and Hill City. At the start of the decade, in 1880, "people from all over the county came to Nicodemus to vote in the first election to decide the county seat." The outcome saw Millbrook winning the privilege to be the temporary seat until the county could become better organized.[29] Hill City's primary backers, its namesake W. R. Hill and investor J. P. Pomeroy, plotted to wrest the seat away from the town that sat only a few miles to Hill City's south. The prestige of being the county seat could bring additional settlers, and it most definitely brought county residents to town, for example, to conduct official business at the courthouse. Such people would then patronize businesses and eateries before heading home. As the county seat, a town could be catapult towards a stable existence or, failing to gain that status, could die.

To win the battle, however, Hill Citians had to enlist support because Millbrook had a larger population. With Nicodemus "the second town in size in the county," Hill and Pomeroy thus solicited support from its settlers. To assist in the process, Hill purchased the influential *Western Cyclone* from H. K. Lightfoot and named white man George Sanford to serve as

[28] "Concerning Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[29] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 28 April 1887.

editor.[30] The sale is remarkable because Lightfoot made no mention in previous issues that he desired to sell his newspaper. The sum Hill paid for the acquisition is unknown, but it must have been a figure Lightfoot could not refuse. The impact of the new ownership quickly became clear. In the middle part of 1886, when the challenge to Millbrook's status was beginning to be mounted, the *Western Cyclone* endorsed neither town. Instead, the newspaper worried that "the infamy of the county seat fight of five years ago threatens to be repeated. . . . County seat fights are bad at the best, and only tend towards keeping our county back and drives capital from its borders, but we think the sooner the vexed question is settled the better it will be for the county at large."[31]

Although owned by W. R. Hill, the initial neutrality of the paper on this issue, though seemingly innocuous, spoke volumes on behalf of Hill City. If the Nicodemus newspaper truly believed county seat fights were detrimental to a county's development, it could easily have argued on behalf of Millbrook and chastised Hill City partisans for taking up the fight. Instead, rather than appear to be a tool of Hill, the neutrality maintained the paper's credibility among the Nicodemus readership by appearing to remain independent of its owner's interests by not endorsing one community or the other. Over the ensuing months leading to the election, however, Hill's ownership made certain that his appointed editor, George Sanford, would ultimately provide some six hundred readers with pro-Hill City editorials when they perused the *Western Cyclone*. By securing the support of Nicodemus residents, Pomeroy and Hill had little need to vigorously promote Hill City to the other, smaller townships of the county.

Millbrook, for whatever reason, failed to do itself any favors in soliciting support from Nicodemus. For example, blacks in Nicodemus were a scrupulous people, and an infamous

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[30] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 12 May 1887.
[31] *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 5 August 1887.

group in Millbrook lacked any ethics whatsoever. Little is actually known about the Hawri-Gordon ring, but it was led by H. J. Hawri and James Gordon and was comprised of men who took *any* action necessary to promote Millbrook's interests, which, presumably, served their interests in turn.[32] Although hardly as organized as Boss Tweed's Tammany Hall, the Hawri-Gordon ring possessed enough power to rouse the ire of most everyone outside of Millbrook. The ring notoriously used the November 1886 elections as an opportunity to put friends into office which would protect Millbrook's interests. They attempted to bribe delegates participating in the Graham County Republican convention on 29 September with cash and whiskey, but their efforts were thwarted when thirty delegates walked out in protest of the corruption.[33] Nevertheless, charges of voter fraud emerged when it came to light that dead men had apparently stuffed ballot boxes on behalf of Millbrook-friendly candidates. The *Western Cyclone* reported that most all in Nicodemus vowed to join other townships in opposing the attempt of Hawri and Gordon to enhance the power of their community.[34]

Corruption would not be tolerated in Nicodemus, as it perverted the democratic process residents there so deeply treasured. The Reverend Daniel Hickman, the organizer of the second colony to arrive in Nicodemus in 1878, had acquired great influence through his role as pastor. Trying to capitalize on his authority, Millbrook supporters offered a bribe—one person made the dubious claim that it was as much as $10,000, an enormous sum that is difficult to believe could have been raised for the purpose of winning one man's influence—to deliver votes on behalf of the current seat.[35] Not surprisingly, Hickman refused the bribe, and when Hill City won the vote

[32] The number of men in the organization is a mystery. Other than Hawri and Gordon, names of other men involved in the ring are unknown. Also unknown are Hawri's and Gordon's occupations.

[33] *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 14 October 1886.

[34] Ibid.

[35] "Reverend D. Hickman's Activities in the Early Life of Graham Co.," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS; "County Seat Fight," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

in March of 1888, “grateful Hill Citians began calling him Uncle Dan in honor of his loyalty . . . It was said of him that whenever he made up his mind that he was right that nothing could change him.”[36] Millbrook’s *Graham County Democrat*, however, referred to Hickman as “Darkey Dan.”[37] As proud as his fellow blacks could have been with his integrity, those in Hill City regarded him as a bona fide hero. Businessmen showered him with gifts of appreciation; J. P. Pomeroy produced for Hickman a pearl-handled pocket knife with the Lord’s Prayer inscribed on it, and W. R. Hill gave him a silk tall hat and two lots in the town. On the night when Hill City won the vote to be the permanent county seat, “two men took him on their sholdiers [sic] and walked up and down the streets with him . . . Then they placed him in the float which was decorated for the speakers of the evening. His family were given the front room of the upper floor of the Pomeroy Hotel, for occupance, during the ceremonies, where they could see and hear everything.”[38]

The influence of J. P. Pomeroy’s money and political connections surely deserve recognition in winning the fight, as well as a force of nature in the form of a tornado which flattened Millbrook the previous August. It is undeniable, however, that with the advocacy on behalf of Hill City by the Nicodemus *Western Cyclone* and Reverend Hickman, along with the hostile behavior of those from Millbrook, the people of Nicodemus deserve most of the credit for shifting the course of county history. Hill City ballooned, and before another challenge to Hill City’s status could be mounted, Pomeroy financed a $10,000 court house to secure the town’s position. It would most certainly not be an exaggeration that almost all of Hill City’s success

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[36] “Reverend D. Hickman’s Activities in the Early Life of Graham Co.,” Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS

[37] *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 4 May 1888.

[38] Ibid. Reverend Hickman eventually left the area to move to Topeka, where he became a janitor at the State House for ten years before becoming a pastor of a congregation in Junction City. When he died at the age of 76 in 1917, however, he was buried in Nicodemus’s Mt. Olivet cemetery. Hill City *Reveille-New Era*, 29 November 1917.

came via friendly ex-slaves who took their civic duty to participate in politics very seriously. Indeed, their alliance with Hill City rather than Millbrook was the determining factor in the issue's outcome. While Hill City prospered, Millbrook, on the other hand, never recovered from the blow that would have assisted in helping the town recover from the tornado. It was quickly abandoned and little today marks the spot where it once stood.

The focus Nicodemus residents placed on church life, their determination to establish a public school for the children, and the town's ability to attract proprietors were not unique to this all-black community, and neither was their involvement in the county seat war. Throughout Kansas and the western frontier, pitched battles were fought for the privilege of being the county seat. Of the 105 counties in Kansas, fifty-six have had at least two different county seats, and the fights between the competing towns saw questionable behavior exhibited among the parties in an effort to win.[39] Nicodemus residents were in the middle of such behavior, with bribes offered, newspaper editorials raging against corrupt politics, and W. R. Hill purchasing the *Western Cyclone*. Furthermore, Nicodemus, as a third party, played the deciding role in the fight's outcome, much like communities in other counties which were not competing for the honor.[40]

While a variety of reasons were involved in which town they chose to back in the county seat fight, racial issues that had come to the fore during Nicodemus's first decade of existence were a prime factor in Nicodemus residents throwing their support to Hill City. Despite the general tolerance for all races in Graham County, the interaction of different races was not always in harmony. Even some Nicodemus settlers were wary of both white and Indian men. Most incidents, however, spawned from whites in the central part of the county.

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[39] Homer E. Socolofsky, "County-Seat Wars in Kansas," *The Trail Guide* 9 (December 1964), 3.
[40] Ibid., 9.

For the most part, though Nicodemus was always overwhelmingly, if not totally, a black population, those who settled there welcomed people of different races and displayed generous hospitality to them. Whites who passed through on their way to another destination received excellent service while staying at Z. T. Fletcher's hotel. Before the town began to truly bustle, a pregnant Mrs. Bailey, a white woman traveling from Iowa, received care as the womenfolk in the town served as midwives for the birth of her son in August 1879. When her husband offered recompense to those who aided his wife, the women vehemently refused.[41] As noted, several white businessmen arrived in town and their various services brought them prosperity through the patronage of their black neighbors.

These examples of their general behavior not only indicate the willingness of Nicodemus's inhabitants to treat their white brethren well, but they might also point to an ulterior motive. Any fledgling community needs good publicity in order to attract more settlers and, in turn, survive. This fact was especially important in a time when the editor of a widely circulated newspaper could greatly assist or hurt another town's image. When transient whites finally arrived at the end of their journey and told of the freedmen's hospitality in Nicodemus, newspapers began proclaiming the town's greatness, especially the *Atchison Daily Champion* and the *Topeka Commonwealth*. Thus, while the sincerity of their behavior is not to be doubted, it is also not unreasonable to postulate that their actions served to represent Nicodemus well in the eyes of potential settlers.

There were exceptions to the general rule of showing respect and kindness towards other races. The first settlers feared the Osage Indians of Oklahoma who passed through the area on their way to or from hunts at the base of the Rocky Mountains. Z. T. Fletcher's wife said that despite the kindness of the Native Americans, blacks "were afraid of the red face, and ran to hide

[41] "A Sick Woman," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

in a cliff they knew of," but the Indians followed and assuaged the fear.[42] Such fear of the Natives likely stemmed from several reasons. One, these ex-slaves probably had little if any contact with Indians in Kentucky since most tribes there had been forced west much earlier in the century. Secondly, several men who resided in Nicodemus were members of the all-black 9th and 10th Cavalry, the famed Buffalo Soldiers. They served as scouts, and a decade before the first settlers established Nicodemus, these soldiers witnessed Indians devastate their unit at the Battle of Beecher Island in 1868 before rallying the courage to overcome their enemies.[43] Finally, as Lulu Craig wrote from her notes:

> The Indians were more sagacious than they got credit for being. The two women that the Cheyennes carried off were taken to lure the men of the settlement to destruction. They intended to lead them into a trap and massacre them.
>
> Three years after the disaster at Beecher Island the kidnapped women returned to their homes. One brought her Cheyenne baby with her and was promptly discarded by her husband. She lost her mind and died in an asylum for [the] insane. The other one returned to the home of her parents.[44]

Between general unfamiliarity, war experiences, and stories of kidnappings, blacks new to the region were understandably wary of Indians during the initial months of the settlement. But such calamites as war and kidnapping raids were extremely rare by this point in Kansas history; it was now simply a matter of learning to trust visiting Indians, which would be accomplished through frequent contact with the passers-by. When members of the Osage tribe shared portions of their hunt with the starving colonists, the freedmen came to respect, if not become friends with, the Natives who also had also suffered immensely at the hands of white men.

While displeasure with Indians likely came as a result of unfamiliarity with this different race and some unfortunate events caused by a hostile tribe, John Niles railed against the white

[42] "First Colony," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

[43] "Battle of Beecher Island," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS. The commanding officer of the unit, Colonel George Forsyth, wrote that these black men comprised "The best fighting unit of our army, never known to fail nor to quit."

[44] Craig, "Book Manuscript," Lulu Craig Papers, Exodusters Box, GCHS.

race for its sins against his own. At a Fourth of July event in 1880, he proclaimed black superiority over all others, predicting that his race would dominate and govern the United States and other lands within a few generations. He advocated indemnities from the government for the crime of enslaving his people, and he called for a convention to be held in September for blacks and sympathetic whites to join together and sue the government.[45] There is, however, no record of the convention taking place. Nevertheless, one witness reported, "Strange to say, the idea took with a great many people."[46] Indeed, a resolution concerning the payment of reparations was introduced in the Kansas legislature by Jim League of Leavenworth. Niles even traveled to Washington, D.C. and garnered attention in the nation's capital for demanding "a stupendous indemnity for ex-slaves."[47] Although he gained no traction there, Niles later claimed that Kansas Senator John Ingalls backed his ideas.[48] Only when he was appointed the clerk of Graham County and was accused of improprieties with funds did Niles' popularity and his idea for payments begin to wane.[49]

There is little to indicate that what John Niles proposed truly had wide appeal or stoked contention with whites. The fact that his radicalism propelled him into official office demonstrates that his stance on payments to ex-slaves did not arouse outright hostility towards him among the more populous whites residing in the county at that point. But it would also be prudent to assume that, in a place where extreme weather could change the local economy's fortunes in a matter of hours, whites were reluctant to part ways with even a portion of their hard-earned money, especially when many of them had fought on behalf of eradicating the

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[45] W. L. Chambers, "Niles . . . of Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS, 6.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid, 12.
[48] Ibid., 8
[49] Ibid., 7. John Niles ultimately landed in jail for fraud, and in the course of his trial, it was revealed that he had murdered a man in Tennessee in 1869. He was pardoned for the murder later.

peculiar institution. Only the most liberal of whites, such as Representative League of Leavenworth, backed the radical idea, but there is no evidence of it gaining even modest support. When this radicalism was combined with his malfeasance in office, Niles quite possibly might have directly contributed to the animosity some whites in Graham County began to display to the Nicodemus settlers beginning in the early 1880s.

John Niles should not be mistaken as a scapegoat for racial bias against blacks. Rather, racism in western Kansas would have existed even if Niles had never shown his face or opened his mouth. Although some of the racial tension arose from nearby Webster in Rooks County, most of it originated from Millbrook, the temporary seat of Graham County and, as a result, where Nicodemus residents had to go to conduct official business. Tensions were exacerbated when the battle for the county seat heated up later in the decade.

In the years leading to the county seat fight, however, white residents in the area, particularly those from Millbrook, made clear their opposition to interacting with their black neighbors. For example, for the Christmas celebration in 1880, merchants in Millbrook attempted to keep blacks from a public dance. Those from Nicodemus attended anyway, and the dancing of blacks and whites together prompted complaints of mixing, which in turn resulted in a brawl.[50] It was alleged that a group of disgruntled blacks attacked using an assortment of weapons, including war clubs and boomerangs.[51] The fight reportedly lasted for over an hour before broken up, and despite damage to Millbrook's mill, only minor scrapes and aches were reported. Nevertheless, hard feelings were created for the county's blacks who could not

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[50] "Roscoe," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS, 2.
[51] "Niles . . . of Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS, 7.

understand the attempted prohibition on their presence when they never cared if whites appeared at their social events in Nicodemus.[52]

The Christmas incident fueled a hatred that would not subside. In fact, as the years progressed, the number of indignities experienced by blacks visiting Millbrook increased. As one resident explained in the midst of the county seat fight, "There had been several scrimmages" between the citizens of each town "whenever the colored people had to go to the county seat to do business."[53] The vitriol boiled over, resulting in murder. In the spring of 1888, J. R. Hawkins was a Nicodemus resident who served as the clerk for the district court which was located in Millbrook, and in town for business, he dined at a hotel where a ruffian named Jeff Stewart proclaimed, "I don't eat with niggers." Hawkins left to avoid a scene, and according to the Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, Stewart followed the clerk out and, "without giving any reason, proceeded to pummel Mr. H. with his fist in a most unmerciful manner."[54] When Stewart was set free without having to pay his five-dollar fine, Nicodemus residents erupted and armed themselves for war. As the editor for the *Western Cyclone* wrote in justifying the outrage in the affair's aftermath, "No town in this county can boast of as peaceable quiet, moral law abiding citizens as can Nicodemus, but they will resent a wrong when presented and we assure you they will not go beyond the bounds of reason to do it."[55] They threatened to come to Millbrook en masse and ransack the town. Only when Sheriff Willis Elsworth's intervened did cooler heads prevail.[56]

That is until William Kelley entered the fray. Depending on who was describing him, William Kelley was, in the eyes of his black brethren, a respectable man living on a farm near

[52] "Roscoe," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS, 3.
[53] "County Seat Fight," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[54] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 3 March 1887.
[55] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.
[56] "The Stewart Kelley Affair," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

Nicodemus who “was a yellow fellow but a good neighbor and a far better citizen than Stewart.”[57] Whites, on the other hand, portrayed him as “an overbearing, vicious kind of a fellow who terrorized the city of Millbrook whenever he decided to go upon a rampage.”[58] Regardless of his character, Kelley’s presence in the Hoopes & Mitchell billiard hall drew the ire of Jeff Stewart, who proclaimed himself “the best God damn man in Graham county.”[59] The mouthpieces for Millbrook and Hill City, however, asserted that Kelley took umbrage with not only Stewart’s boast but also with the white ruffian’s treatment of J. R. Hawkins. He then began the brawl, and in the midst of it, “Stewart jerked out his gun, a 44-calibre Colt, and shot Kelley,” who was pronounced dead some thirty minutes later.[60]

A jury convicted Jeff Stewart for the murder, concluding the most unfortunate chapter in Graham County race relations to that point. This event had been building since the skirmish at Christmas in 1880, and although no other race-inspired crimes happened through the turn of the century, the relationship between the blacks in Nicodemus and the whites of Millbrook was broken beyond repair. Well into the second decade of the twentieth century, local blacks were cognizant of the biases against them held by the former Millbrook residents who remained in the area even after that town ceased to exist.

The incidents with Millbrook citizens were not the only sources of racial discontent in the area. During the controversy surrounding E. P. McCabe’s possible bid for a third term as state auditor, the *Western Cyclone* reacted angrily when the editor of the *Stockton Record* ridiculed “the Ethiopians of Nicodemus,” retorting that “‘The Ethiopians of Nicodemus’ are a credit to the

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[57] “Springdale, AR, 2-15-47,” Nicodemus Murders, File 2, GCHS. The person who described him in this document was the son of a man who lived next door to Kelley and developed a close relationship with the murder victim.

[58] “Kelley Killed,” Millbrook *Graham County Democrat*, 8 March 1888; “The Killing of Kelley,” Hill City *People’s Reveille*, 16 February 1905.

[59] “Kelley Killed,” Millbrook *Graham County Democrat*, 8 March 1888.

[60] Ibid.

almond-eyed shoat that runs the *Rooks County Record*," and referred to the employees of the *Record* derogatorily as "Chinamen" before asserting "we havn't [sic] any space to waste on the poor ignorant Mongolian as he isn't worth noticing."[61] Nicodemus also earned from area bigots the unfortunate nickname "Niggerdemus," a nickname which regretfully has stuck with the community even into the twenty-first century.

While local matters of race held the attention of the county's blacks, Nicodemus settlers also took a keen interest in the plight of those they left behind in the South, and the *Western Cyclone* often reported on political conditions there. In 1886, the paper bemoaned the denial of rights to blacks in Dixie and expressed outrage over the fact that the murderers of fourteen black men in Carrelton, Mississippi, were never brought to justice.[62] And in native Kentucky, the newspaper expressed concern that "Kentucky still remains in a state of barbarism and refuses to be civilized" as violence continued to rage among both blacks and whites and that nothing was done by the government to quell the killings.[63] Discussing potential presidential candidates for 1888, it wrote, "The organs of the colored race in the south are booming Robert T. Lincoln for the [R]epublican nomination for president. The son of the great emancipator would make a good candidate, but unfortunatly [sic] the colored race in the south has very little to do with the election of a president. Tissue ballots and shot guns are too powerfull [sic]."[64] An editorial for the *Western Cyclone* concluded,

> If the Negroes of the south are shiftless and lazy, the white men of the south are responsible for it. They deny the Negro every advantage except the right to work hard for small wages. They will not allow the Negro to take any part in the making of the laws under which he is compelled to live. They either drive him from the polls or destroy his

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[61] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 1 July 1887.
[62] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 2 September 1886.
[63] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 29 July 1886.
[64] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 2 June 1887.

> ballots as fast as he casts them. He is a social outcast. He is a disfranchised citizen. He is an ostracized human being.[65]

Such stories served as reminders that for as long as blacks protected their rights and practiced them, they would never again experience the indignities they were subjected to in Kentucky and that others of their race continued to suffer.

The 1880s saw Nicodemus boom as entrepreneurs arrived in town to establish businesses, but much more important for these ex-slaves was the ability to exercise their rights as citizens. After enduring the first difficult years, Nicodemus enjoyed a renaissance. Molded by their experiences in the aftermath of the Civil War, those who settled Nicodemus embraced their opportunity to exercise their right to vote after having been terrorized in the South for having the audacity to go to the polls. Active in both local and state politics, the ex-slaves not only voted as a bloc for the Republican Party responsible for ending their captivity, but they also attained positions of power themselves, most notably State Auditor E. P. McCabe. To not take part in voting despite knowing what blacks in the South were suffering was unforgivable; to not vote Republican was nearly as serious an offense. To support a Democrat, or worse, actually *be* a Democrat, was considered a betrayal of all those who suffered from slavery and prejudice and earned condemnation. Active participation in politics provided blacks with an equal voice, and in the case of the Graham County seat fight between Millbrook and Hill City, it was the deciding voice. These ex-slaves had come a long way in their lifetime, and they were solid evidence that Kansas itself had also greatly progressed, for the *Western Cyclone* noted, "Twenty-five years ago Kansas [D]emocrats chased the colored man by moonlight . . . Thirty years ago no colored man would venture out by moonlight when he had the remotest idea that the [D]emocrats were going

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[65] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 12 May 1887.

to run him."[66] They came to settle Nicodemus in the hopes of starting a new life in which they owned land and enjoyed equal rights. They achieved both of these goals and even gained a measure of prosperity in doing so.

But while they escaped the South's oppression, the residents of Nicodemus received reminders, particularly from Millbrook citizens, that they were different because of their skin. From the 1880 Christmas dance incident to the events leading to William Kelley's murder, Millbrook was hardly a bastion of racial tolerance. Others in the area also made no efforts to hide their disdain for their black neighbors, be it the editor of the *Stockton Record* or those who sneeringly referred to the town as "Niggerdemus." Unlike in the South, however, this was almost certainly the minority sentiment in the area, or men like Lewis Welton, J. R. Hawkins, and W. L. Sayers never would have commanded the respect they had in their time of public service. Rather than lynching blacks for voting or for holding public office, the small group of racists could only grumble about the local blacks. And when a person like Jeff Stewart murdered a black man, a jury convicted him, a stark contrast to the acquittals which were so common in such cases in Dixie.[67] Furthermore, a man like John Niles could openly proclaim the superiority of the black race without fear of retribution. But despite the free exercise of rights, the residents of Nicodemus recognized a trend developing that indicated liberal racial attitudes in Kansas were being eroded. Nevertheless, the ex-slaves generally enjoyed life on the Plains; no longer second-class citizens, they stood up for themselves and challenged those who denigrated them without fear of retaliation.

With the town booming during this decade, there was no reason to believe their situation would not continue to improve. They were convinced that a railroad company would lay tracks

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[66] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 2 September 1886.

[67] Not only did Jeff Stewart receive a sentence of twelve years at the Lansing penitentiary, he left behind a wife and several children. May Stewart filed for and received a divorce.

beside the town which would not only connect Nicodemus to markets both east and west but also bring more and more immigrants who would call Nicodemus home. By the close of the 1880s, however, the future they imagined failed to materialize. As the new century dawned and the health of the community grew worse with many settlers abandoning it to pursue opportunities in bigger cities, the survival of Nicodemus was in doubt. This doubt, however, never existed in the minds of the few who remained behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

FROM BOOM TO BUST

Every Kansas town in its nascent stages of development recognized the importance of railroad tracks placed alongside the community. The steady expansion of railroad lines throughout the Western frontier provided a vital lifeline for towns fortunate enough to attract this mode of transportation. An iron horse regularly running through town would all but guarantee the community's survival with its connections to far-off markets and the ease in which prospective immigrants possessing a variety of skills could arrive and strengthen a town's viability. Attracting a railroad to a town did not guarantee that it would enjoy sustained success for generations to come, but a failure to do so undoubtedly stacked the odds of success overwhelmingly against it. Businesses in a town without tracks could not compete with the lower prices railroads brought to nearby communities, and people abandoned their own railroad-less town rather than frequently journey to and from such cheaper proprietors. These negative effects would ultimately be felt in Nicodemus after they were shocked to learn they were being bypassed for Bogue.

Although the railroad was undoubtedly the greatest factor in the busting of Nicodemus's boom period, other causes played into its substantial decline. Repeated crop failures in the final decade of the nineteenth century, the lure of opportunities in larger cities at the start of the twentieth century, and the Great Depression which caused economic ruin, all contributed to the decline of Nicodemus as well. The troubles faced by Nicodemus between 1888, when the railroad companies decided to ignore it, and 1953, when the post office shut its doors, were too much for most everyone. There were a few, however, who had either lived through the hardships in the first year and a half of the town's existence or had learned the stories handed down, and

economic difficulties did not compare to those kinds of tribulations. These few settlers felt an obligation to remain and stay to carry on what the ex-slaves had begun. The travails they would face over the course of sixty years would present challenges similar to those faced by the original settlers. The survival of Nicodemus would once again rely on the constitutions of a people who had faith in God and a determination to preserve the community their forebears had founded.

Nearly every fledgling town in western Kansas had at least one, if not several, newspapers that existed for the primary reason of promoting the community to outsiders. Issues were sent to editors in towns back east, such as Atchison and Topeka, in hopes that newspapers in those towns would deem the western towns worthy for settlement. In Graham County, where there were just three primary towns—Millbrook, Hill City, and Nicodemus—and a host of struggling townships, seven newspapers existed to print favorable propaganda.[1]

Boosterism was not unique to just Kansas; every newly-settled town in the West spread propaganda in the form of booklets, pamphlets, and maps to attract businessmen, laborers, and anyone else who might bolster a small town's population and economy.[2] Items tended to embellish an area's qualities while omitting altogether anything that outsiders might find unappealing. In addition to newspapers, any entity associated with a town took part in promoting it, be it railroad companies, immigration societies, local chambers of commerce, or real estate agents and land speculators.[3] Los Angeles, San Diego, and Boise are just three cities that are now well-known but once had to rely on promotional campaigns in their early years. In the western United States, all towns either promoted themselves or died.

[1] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 22 July 1886.

[2] David M. Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 2-3.

[3] Ibid., 6.

For this important cause, Nicodemus boasted the *Western Cyclone* as well as, for a brief period of time, the *Enterprise*. The *Western Cyclone* filled its pages with articles espousing the virtues of Nicodemus. From May 1886 to September 1888, the paper frequently spoke of the good land and cheap homes and friendly residents. In the eyes of the multiple editors who ran the *Western Cyclone* for its two-plus years of existence, the only thing missing was a railroad. "With a railroad, Nicodemus is bound to make one of the best towns in northwest Kansas; it will controle [sic] the trade of all the beautiful country" in the area, "and Nicodemus being the natural trade center is bound to make a booming town as a good farming country is what makes a good lively city."[4]

The newspaper covered any and all railroad news. It lamented the political power railroad companies possessed in choosing how to do conduct their business, but with an expected bumper crop of wheat, corn, and potatoes in 1886, editor Arthur Tallman acknowledged, "A railroad is what we stand badly in want of, so our farmers can stop paying tribute to the merchants of Logan, Stockton, and Ellis."[5] Everyone in the community understood that they needed the railroad much more than the railroad needed them, and most criticism over corrupt practices or inordinate political power ceased as a result.

The excitement over the possibility of a railroad grew to a fever pitch in the last half of the 1880s. The thrilling report that an unnamed company (probably the Missouri Pacific) plotted to construct a rail line between Stockton and Hoxie and would also pass through Webster, Nicodemus, and Hill City was tempered by the fact that W. R. Hill was named as secretary to the company's board. The *Western Cyclone* worried about his propensity to look out for his interests

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[4] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 23 September 1886.
[5] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 22 July 1886.

and those of his partner, J. P. Pomeroy.[6] When the railroad never materialized, many in the community placed the blame on the shoulders of Hill and Pomeroy. Despite the concerns regarding Hill's involvement, the people of Nicodemus expressed optimism that the whistle of locomotives would be heard in town by the spring of 1887.[7] But by the end of 1886, only towns to the east held any prospect of attracting the lifeline before the summer heat arrived.

With the railroads continuing to progress westward, however, towns seeking to attract a line commenced negotiations with various companies. In January 1887, representatives from a host of small communities in Graham and Rooks Counties met with Missouri Pacific Superintendent W. W. Fagan to discuss bond propositions to finance the railroads. The Nicodemus delegation agreed to raise $16,000, and the town leaders agreed to put the issue before a vote on March 22.[8] The following week, the *Western Cyclone*, despite predicting approval in overwhelming numbers, urged all to study the question "with care and judgement."[9] The vote fulfilled the newspaper's prophecy, passing with 96 percent approval, 82-3. The railroad was scheduled to complete the line by 1 December 1887, and the paper rejoiced, proclaiming tracks would bring "all advantages that are to be derived from a railroad and telegraphic communication with the outer world. The price of real estate has already taken a jump and is being eagerly sought after by outside parties. New business men are looking . . . to locating here, outside capital is beginning to look this way, and the boom is on."[10] To add to the excitement, the 5 May issue reported Missouri Pacific surveyors had arrived in Nicodemus to plot the area.

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[6] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 9 September 1886.
[7] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 18 November 1886.
[8] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 20 January 1887.
[9] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 27 January 1887.
[10] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.

By September, though, consternation had set in over the lack of progress with the planning. The Missouri Pacific had paused its building efforts along both the north and south forks of the Solomon River because the company was laying too much track to muster profits. Such a reason was inadequate in the eyes of Nicodemus's residents, and the *Western Cyclone* voiced their sentiments in proclaiming, "The Missouri Pacific Railway would surely do well to build into Graham County this fall. Bonds were voted promptly and liberally and the people have a right to expect the road."[11] Ever the optimists, the belief that the railroad would come the following spring was widely held by those in Nicodemus. If people worried that the railroad they had so long desired would not arrive, there is no record, but strong doubts had to be entering their minds wondering if the day would ever come.

At the start of 1888, hope appeared to have been lost on the Missouri Pacific but instilled in the Union Pacific as its surveyors "spent several weeks in the county."[12] Repeated reports along the lines of "the railroad is no longer in doubt, but a solid fact" pervaded nearly every newspaper article concerning the issue through the summer, but Nicodemus continued to lack a line by its side. To their great disappointment, the Union Pacific bypassed them, running a line from Plainville through Bogue to Hill City, which was guaranteed a depot by November 10.[13] If any optimism remained, it bordered on denial, for the *Western Cyclone* noted, "The railroaders are beginning to thin out, [and] several outfits have passed through this week to seek other fields."

The moment had passed and finding a scapegoat had begun. While records mention no specific names, most everyone would have agreed with Mrs. Ola Wilson's belief that the railroad was lost because of "politricking," explaining that a few individuals in the area prospered and

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[11] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 9 September 1887.
[12] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 24 February 1888.
[13] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 10 August 1888.

those with influence did not care for the black community.[14] The "few individuals" Wilson mentioned undoubtedly included J. P. Pomeroy, who was one of the very few with interests in Graham County who possessed the amount of money needed to influence the Union Pacific Railroad's decision for a route. The implication that racism was behind Pomeroy's rationale is certainly debatable. If he harbored any racist attitudes, no evidence is known, and even if he embraced the blacks of Nicodemus only as a matter of self-interest during the county seat fight, he nevertheless called on them to celebrate Hill City's victory, and he associated with them on frequent visits to Nicodemus. Perhaps the most crucial piece of evidence that Pomeroy did not purposely seek to divert the railroad from Nicodemus was that he had significant interests there. The *Western Cyclone* reported in July 1887 that the man "purchased seventy lots in Nicodemus."[15] While it is possible Pomeroy was willing to swallow the losses of his real estate investments in Nicodemus in favor of focusing on the development of Hill City, it does not seem likely. Pomeroy could be blamed for not working to bring a railroad to the black community, but to say that he and other white men diverted rails away from Nicodemus on account of race is unlikely.

Regardless of who was to blame for stymieing the railroad proposals for Nicodemus, the *Western Cyclone* recognized that this development could have disastrous consequences on the fate of Nicodemus. The final issue of the paper had an editorial which optimistically wrote, "Nicodemus and her business men have nothing to cause them alarm. For every one that goes now we will get ten wide awake men next spring. Don't get frightened, hold on to your property and be ready to enjoy the real boom that will surely come."[16] Despite the paper's pleading, when

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[14] *Kansas State Collegian*, 9 January 1970.
[15] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 8 July 1887.
[16] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 7 September 1888. The reason why the newspaper's publication came to an abrupt end is not clear, but sporadic editorial comments suggest that poor advertising revenue was the cause.

the railroad companies shunned Nicodemus, businessmen quickly relocated, many to nearby Bogue, Stockton, and Hill City—communities with railroads. In doing so, these proprietors earned the enmity of those who chose to stay.

While the railroad certainly was the final factor in deciding to uproot, the *Western Cyclone* wrote frequently in a manner which suggested Nicodemus was suffering from malaise long before it was apparent the railroads would not be gracing Nicodemus with their presence. The newspaper continued to claim the town still enjoyed boom times, writing, "Drouths [sic], cyclones, hail storms and the many other impediments of similar nature, fails to retard the progress in the least of this well located and enterprising town,"[17] but Nicodemus was failing to attract more settlers than they were losing. This prompted businessmen to establish a committee to promote immigration by issuing circulars which emphasized "the advantages offered by our section." The circular presented prospective immigrants with the image of a vibrant community, boasting its location, a new schoolhouse, several churches, and "four general stores, one hardware store, two hotels, one drug store, and one bank,"[18] but the economy—both local and national—had taken a turn for the worse. "The people of Graham County and Western Kansas," the *Western Cyclone* encouraged, "need not think for a single moment that hard times is confined principally in their mindset, because it is not. The tightness of money is universal, in some States in a more depressed condition."[19] If a period of economic trouble serves as a catalyst for a family to pack up and seek their fortunes elsewhere, then Nicodemus was not the beneficiary of such movement. The culprit was undoubtedly the absence of a railroad. Without a railroad to conveniently transport new settlers, the immigrants would choose instead to make their homes in towns that had access to this form of transportation. No railroad meant no new patrons for the

[17] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 16 September 1887.
[18] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 20 January 1888.
[19] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 25 November 1887.

local businesses, not to mention an inability to sell cheaper items to the people who already lived in Nicodemus. With its railroad, Hill City prospered, and the *Western Cyclone* enviously noted that the county seat "is assuming metropolitan airs. There is a spirit of activity all over the town that is refreshing."[20] The newspaper recognized that Nicodemus had been deprived of a stable future by not attracting a railroad, and as a result, the boisterous community spirit that was existent only twelve months before had been sucked out of its residents.

The blame for the town's decline cannot solely be placed on J. P. Pomeroy or the railroad companies. Having tried to withstand the region's harsh climate, many finally had had enough of the extreme heat in the summer and the brutal cold and blizzards that came from Canada during the winter. Without the conveniences of the modern era, life remained difficult even after ten years of living on the Plains. W. L. Sayers explained,

> It was no unusual thing for the settlers to put out their corn and spring crops, labor with the same until mid-summer and then have the burning heat from Texas and Oklahoma burn it to dry and withered leaves in a day. And that was not all. In those days, there was nothing to break the force of the blizzard of the northwest as it swept from the Dakotas upon the homes and the unprotected livestock of the settlers, until livestock and sometimes human life perished.[21]

Having described the elements they had to repeatedly endure each season, he wrote, "Those who were of faint heart turned their faces away from their lands and their friends and returned to labor for some one else as the chaff was winnowed from the wheat."[22] For many, the breaking point was the drought of 1887 which resulted in a devastating crop failure.[23] Although one can certainly sympathize with those who no longer had the fortitude to endure and left to find a more hospitable home, the people who remained in their barely-decade-old community believed that those "who left the community deserted their trust, withdrawing their support, and abandoning

[20] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 6 July 1888.
[21] Sayers, "The Black Pioneer," *Bogue Messenger*, 25 February 1932.
[22] Ibid.
[23] "Decline of Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

the farm when they were needed. They throttled progress to a great extent."[24] Progress ground to a halt when the town's younger residents left the community while its elders, also worn out, lacked the energy and monetary means to revitalize Nicodemus.[25] To compound the problem further, the businesses closing their doors meant a shrinking tax base to fund the school and other public-supported projects. Through 1887, Nicodemus boomed as there appeared to be no question as to whether or not it would earn the privilege of a railroad; by the middle of 1888, there was no question Nicodemus would eventually be in a dire position that required a courageous fight in order to survive.

Despite the trials faced by Nicodemus, it did not disappear over night. Indeed, it was not until the Great Depression that the community seemed on the verge of extinction. Nicodemus's peak population is estimated to have ranged anywhere from 600 to 800 persons at the height of its boom in the mid 1880s.[26] When people started leaving to find new homes, it was not in the scale of a mass exodus, but rather as a steady trickle that had begun in earnest by 1890, for over 500 blacks still called it home two decades later.[27] Although opportunities to make a living dwindled, abandoning Nicodemus and all it represented could not have been a decision easily reached, no matter what the critics they left behind had to say about them. Had it not been for the strong sentimental pull of the community, however, it is likely that a flood of residents would have fled a town offering few prospects for employment. Only when the Great Depression arrived in the 1930s did the population begin its steep decline due to "plague, drouth [sic], depression . . . inadequate housing and economic opportunities, and a high death rate among the

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] *New York Times*, 18 October 1964; *Wichita Eagle*, 5 February 1984.

[27] "City of Nicodemus Named to National Register of Historical Places," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

elderly" taking their tolls.[28] Not only did residents leave because of the economic conditions, but it can be argued that those of a younger generation did not feel the bond to their hometown that their parents and grandparents held so deeply. But even the bonds holding the older generations to the town were broken out of a necessity to survive, and as a result, Nicodemus counted just sixteen residents in 1950.[29] This figure is a little misleading, however, because many moved from the town to farm the land immediately surrounding Nicodemus.

Nevertheless, the sixty years leading to the breaking point provided difficult moments for the close-knit community. The town had a strict policy prohibiting the sale or use of alcohol within the city's confines, and other measures were taken to limit the temptation for debauchery. As late as 1886, Nicodemus had no saloon or billiard hall or other potential house for gambling; the *Western Cyclone* boasted "its citizens are moral and refined people; no drunkenness rodyism, no cursing or whooping disturbs the peace of the place. Its example is worthy the attention of its sister towns."[30] As economic conditions declined, however, Nicodemus failed to serve as the paragon of virtue. Incidents of crime—unheard of (or simply not mentioned in the oral histories) in this place of strong communal values—were becoming more frequent. In a town where few had much money at all, the first episode of petty crime came at the start of the economic downturn in 1888, but the notation of it in the newspaper indicated that such crimes were commonplace not just in Nicodemus but in all of Graham County. In describing the robbery of Dave VanWyck's store, the *Western Cyclone* wrote, "From the amount of goods taken, it appears more than one wagon was used. The country is overrun with a class of loafers hunting work and

[28] *Hill City Times*, 9 September 1976.
[29] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 31 July 1983.
[30] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 1 May 1886.

praying they won't find it. It may be necessary to organize a vigilant committee to rid the country of these scoundrels."[31]

More disconcerting, however, was the increase of murders in Nicodemus and the surrounding area after the turn of the century. The shooting death of William Kelley had shocked Nicodemus into a rage against Jeff Stewart and the city from which he had hailed. Subsequent violent deaths were met with shock but little anger. Perhaps it was because Kelley met his demise at the hands of a white man while nearly every early-twentieth century murder was a black-on-black crime. In fact, when Henry Wilson was charged with murdering Sarah Cohen in Bogue in late March 1904, he initially received sympathy not just from those of his race but from the county residents as a whole. Cohen, an aged black woman from Denver, had allegedly been in the area recruiting prostitutes and had apparently convinced Wilson's wife to accompany her back to Denver while he was away tending to business. When he arrived home and learned of the unwanted houseguest, he stormed to the Bogue train depot and shot through a window and struck Cohen in her seat. The Hill City *People's Reveille* claimed, "All the sympathy seemed to be running with Wilson until he walked up and denied the crime" despite conclusive evidence "that he was seen in the vicinity of the depot."[32] It apparently would have been better for him to admitted to the crime and explained his reason for committing it. The *Hill City Republican* exhibited no compassion, however, stating, "It is but a question of time when the guilty wretch will be brought to justice."[33]

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[31] Nicodemus *Western Cyclone*, 6 July 1888.

[32] Hill City *People's Reveille*, 7 April 1904.

[33] *Hill City Republican*, 1 April 1904. Wilson's wife was also arrested. According to the *Republican*, she boarded the train at Palco and eyewitnesses assert that she locked herself in a closet as the train arrived in Bogue, "evidently suspecting her life was in danger." This made her appear to have foreknowledge of what was about to take place, but the *People's Reveille* story makes that seem unlikely.

Whereas Henry Wilson garnered a measure of sympathy from those who followed the episode, Albert Sayers' involvement in the death of his father-in-law shocked most everyone at the end of June 1906. A member of a prominent Nicodemus family, Sayers fatally wounded Henry Blackman and immediately turned himself in to the sheriff in Hill City, claiming he did it in self-defense.[34] In reporting his trial, the *Hill City Republican* again sided against the alleged perpetrator as it did in the case of Henry Wilson. Though the jury of a second trial deliberated just a few hours before finding him not guilty, the newspaper took it upon itself to conduct the coroner's inquest in the absence of the county attorney, and concluded, "From the evidence and all appearances at the scene of the murder we felt that a human life had been unnecessarily and criminally brought to a tragic ending."[35] Blaming a poor prosecution team in the first trial, in which county attorney F. D. Turck—a good friend of W. L. Sayers, kin of Albert—suffered from poor health and "practically refused to participate in the trial," the newspaper also cited shenanigans in which testimony given to the coroner that rebutted the defendant's claims had gone missing but miraculously reappeared after the witnesses against Sayers had finished testifying.[36] A hung jury resulted in a new trial which saw Albert Sayers acquitted, but the *Republican* lamented, "This shows how adroitly a defense can be handled and how justice can be sidetracked when a case can be properly manipulated," blaming the judge and prosecution of mishandling the case by committing egregious errors.[37]

How the public reacted to this piece of investigative reporting is not certain, but a cloud of doubt followed Albert Sayers afterwards. In 1917, eleven years after he had shot Henry Blackman, he committed suicide at age 36. Although he left behind no rationale for the act,

[34] Hill City *New Era*, 28 June 1906.
[35] *Hill City Republican*, 28 February 1907.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

neighbors supposed "that he was temporarily deranged" after "suffering for several days from the effects of a severe headache, and appeared despondent."[38] Despite earning an acquittal, the infamy of being associated with his father-in-law's death as a result of the *Republican's* piece certainly played a crucial part in the man taking his own life.

The *Republican's* outspoken stance against the two black defendants in these murders is quite striking, even if justifiable in the case of Albert Sayers. Was it a matter of reflecting a growing opinion in the county that black people were menaces to society or simply a strong desire to see criminals be brought to justice? The latter explanation is more likely, for if it was reflecting the racist attitudes of whites in Hill City, the *New Era's* coverage likely would have also called for Sayers to be sent to the gallows, and a racist jury would have complied. No other county newspaper offered such vehement positions when a handful of other black murderers were charged throughout the next forty years, offering more evidence that a trend of hostility against blacks was beginning to take shape. Discounting the notion of racism behind the *Republican's* reporting, it nevertheless represented a belief held in both the county seat and Nicodemus that law and order in Nicodemus needed to be restored among the once-docile residents.

The second decade of the twentieth century saw Nicodemus citizens follow the national pattern of blacks leaving their rural homes for big cities. Instead of heading to Chicago or New York, though, most in Nicodemus remained in the Midwest, preferring Omaha, Kansas City, and Denver to the metropolises east of the Mississippi.[39] The Roaring Twenties and its economic boom did not reach most agricultural communities, including Nicodemus, and black newspapers in the state lamented the closed job markets during this decade.

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[38] Hill City *Reveille-New Era*, 27 September 1917.
[39] *Denver Post*, 17 October 1965.

Matters only got worse after the stock market crashed in 1929. Writing about this difficult period, La Barbara Fly notes that Nicodemus's population dropped to around forty inhabitants as a large number sought opportunities elsewhere. Those who chose to remain had to gain employment with the New Deal agency Works Progress Administration; the township hall completed in 1939 was just one of the projects that kept the town's men employed.[40] With the Depression in full force, it affected black workers worse than whites with over one-third unemployed as compared to just over one-tenth of whites in 1940.[41]

The Depression also took its toll on blacks who farmed the land around Nicodemus. Officials in Graham County established a Farm Bureau in 1934 to provide area farmers and ranchers immediate assistance. Through its coordination, both black and white farmers worked together and loaned implements to minimize the shared misery.[42] Such efforts were not always enough. La Barbara Fly explains, "Only a few original black homesteaders remained owners and occupants of their farms. Most farmers became tenants and rented land."[43] To add to the woes of area farmers, the Great Depression brought natural disasters, as well. The longest consecutive drought to hit this part of Kansas lasted from 1932 until 1934, giving no chance to raise crops and few livestock survived the calamity.[44] The drought and poor farming practices led to the dust storms darkening the sky in mid-afternoon, and despite damp sheets hung around a house to collect the soot, nothing was left uncovered by the thick clouds.[45] When the dry conditions of the 1930s subsided, Nicodemus received too much rain to begin the 1950s. Suffering from great

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[40] La Barbara W. Fly, "Into the Twentieth Century," *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas*, ed. Gregory D. Kendrick (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1986), 73.
[41] *Hays Daily News*, 7 February 1984.
[42] Fly, 73.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., 70
[45] Ibid.

flooding in 1951 and 1953, Webster Reservoir was created in 1956 to contain the troublesome South Solomon River.[46]

As it was for many other minorities, the Second World War provided blacks numerous opportunities for those seeking work to find it. Any youth in the area left for the large cities, be they Wichita or southern California, to fill positions in industries supplying the war effort. When the war ended, few returned to Nicodemus.[47] Little remained behind. Hill City continued to grow while its older sister had "no evidence of the degree of affluence prevalent in Hill City."[48]

During this trying period of thirty years, however, one native provided cause for residents to take pride in where they lived. Veryl Switzer starred in both track and football at integrated Bogue High School before he graduated in 1950. After high school, he attended Kansas State College and played halfback for the football team.[49] In an interview with his alma mater's newspaper, he said his preacher told him, "Don't you come back until you've got a degree."[50] Switzer's exploits on the field brought the men of Nicodemus to the post office to listen to his games on the radio, and he also "brought the dwindliny little town fame."[51] The attention, though, was unnecessary, for "the brilliance of Veryl's football is glory enough for Nicodemus."[52] His athletic excellence also played a key role in integrating the Big Seven, as he was the only black player in the entire conference during the 1953 season. Yet three straight years as an all-conference selection and national honors demonstrated that blacks could perform at high levels and help teams win. Having served as a trailblazer at Kansas State, Switzer managed to cast an even greater light on his hometown when he was selected as the fourth

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[46] Ibid. 74-75.
[47] Ibid., 74.
[48] *Denver Post*, 17 October 1965.
[49] *Salina Journal*, 20 April 1981. Recruited by other schools, Kansas State "certainly impressed" Switzer because it was the first school in the Big Seven Conference to integrate its athletics by offering blacks scholarships.
[50] *Kansas State Collegian*, 28 February 2007.
[51] *Hill City Times*, 12 November 1953.
[52] Ibid.

overall pick by the Green Bay Packers in the 1954 draft. Furthermore, he also followed his preacher's command, earning his diploma before moving on to play professional football.[53] For the first time in several decades, a person from Nicodemus had once again become relevant on a big stage.

Switzer's importance in integration demonstrated the reversal of attitudes held by Kansans as compared to the first few decades after the Civil War. Kansas became a part of the national trend of excluding blacks from white society as the first half of the 1900s progressed. In northwest Kansas, it was not necessarily institutionalized. The high schools Nicodemus students attended, in Bogue and Hill City, were integrated. Mr. Lowell Beecher, a white man and a lifelong resident of the county, says that as he recalls, racism was not a matter of law in his hometown of Hill City. At the movie theater, blacks sat in their own section, but he is not certain if that was imposed or just a matter of preference among the blacks. Restaurants did, however, feed blacks in the back of the kitchen rather than in the regular dining area, but that was a proprietor's decision out of fear that white patrons would refuse to eat with blacks. And some whites did take the approach of the infamous Jeff Stewart. Mr. Beecher recounts a time when his well-built black friend, Everrett "Chuck" Jackson, joined Beecher and other white high schoolers at a truck stop restaurant on the west side of Hill City, and a white trucker approached their table and said to Jackson, "I don't eat with niggers." Mr. Beecher describes with a laugh, "Chuck stood up and said, 'You're right,' and he grabbed the trucker by the neck and threw the guy out of there!"[54]

Though Graham County did not have segregation mandated by law, a *New York Times* article written in the middle of the civil rights movement documented that blacks perceived white

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[53] *Kansas State Collegian*, 28 February 2007.
[54] Lowell Beecher of Hill City, KS, interview by author, 11 April 2007.

people in the area regarded them as second class. “Today, discrimination is evident but some of the Negro farmers and their wives shrug it off, even putting part of the blame on themselves for not doing more to foster more community interest with whites.”[55] Others, however, quickly pointed the finger for strained relations at the whites in the area. The article further stated these blacks had “deep-seated feelings and the day-to-day association with whites in routine activities, such as shopping, disturb them. One young woman observed, ‘My husband has tried hard to change me, but I don’t think I’ll ever get over disliking whites.’”[56] As Mr. Beecher mentioned, blacks ate in the back of restaurants just as they did in the South, and the *Times* story relayed how a black horseman had to join a saddle club in Phillips County to the northeast because the club in Graham County refused him membership. It added, “No one knows of any Negro being asked to join a service club such as Rotary or Kiwanis.”[57] Hill City youth, such as Mr. Beecher and his friends—and many adults, as well—gladly interacted with local blacks, but over the course of sixty or so years, official Hill City went from celebrating blacks like Daniel Hickman and W. L. Sayers to shunning them in the public forum.

With more than a few racists surrounding Nicodemus who did their best to ignore the black settlement, and who certainly had no inclination to assist it as the population dwindled, the village suffered another staggering blow. The nation’s oldest post office with a continually serving black postmaster was closed, but not without acrimony. Symbolically, the post office represented that Nicodemus was more than just a few houses clustered together; its existence said the community was not dead. When it was taken away, residents had to admit—if they had not already done so—that their hometown was in dire trouble. Naturally, postmaster Joe Wilson

[55] *New York Times*, 18 October 1964.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

regretted the decision to close the office which was based out of the parlor of his own home. He had received just one week's notice prior to its closing on October 30, but he understood the decision since "we don't have much here anymore." He did, however, lament having "nothing to attract the young people" to Nicodemus.[58] One younger writer, though, took umbrage with the older generation for allowing the closing to happen, penning a scathing commentary:

> I guess that the old men that have been running things here for the past forty years are satisfied now that they have done away with the post office down here. This was the oldest post office in the county, and we young men don't like to see it go. These old men say that they are not going to have the young men running things here at all. As far as I can see they have run everything into the ground for they have killed all of the churches and all of the business that was here. I think that it is high time that the young men were getting together and going to work and taking hold of the lines and pulling things in order again.[59]

What, exactly, this firebrand expected the elders to do to convince the government to allow a town of just sixteen residents to maintain their post office is unknown. The writer's outrage, however, clearly demonstrated that those who remained in Nicodemus and had the energy to do so would fight to prevent their community from vanishing.

By the time Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus for a white person, Nicodemus was on the verge of death. The community's elders, greatly disappointed in the multitudes who had moved away seeking opportunities, believed the vagabonds "abandoned their values, such as home, friends, opportunities, and leisure; by going to the city; becoming wage earners; practically slaves—losing their identity amid the throngs of weary workers . . ."[60] Such a condemnation is overly harsh. The children who grew up and moved away during this period saw deserting businessmen strip the town of its vibrancy, droughts wreak havoc on farms, dust storms wreak havoc on everyone, and—if they stayed into

[58] *Hill City Times*, 12 November 1953.
[59] "Nicodemus Notes," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[60] "Decline of Nicodemus," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

the 1950s—the South Solomon River flood. Pestilence was practically the only calamity missing to make Nicodemus a biblical story demonstrating God's wrath! The decision to stay or leave could not have been easy for any of the residents, and for those who did leave, perhaps they had endured all that they could manage in western Kansas and needed to find relief elsewhere.

Those who stayed, however, were a people of deep faith and did not believe what they experienced was a punishment from God. They loved their community and what it represented, and they treasured the identity they feared deserters would lose. This is demonstrated by both the betrayal felt by the elders towards those who left and the bitterness of a younger resident directed towards the older citizens when the government closed the post office. The determination to see Nicodemus survive instilled by the first settlers who chose not to return to Kentucky still existed. In the coming decades, proactive citizens would come up with solutions to infuse new life into the community using federal money to fund projects which would improve the town. The natives were assisted by the return of those who had left and even the arrival of persons who had only heard about this place in western Kansas. Nicodemus, on the brink of death, would cheat the reaper that greeted many other towns with similar histories and earn a guarantee of survival.

CHAPTER FIVE

RENEWAL AND GUARANTEED PRESERVATION

The closing of the post office, the nation's oldest with a black postmaster, and a population of a mere sixteen persons marked the nadir of Nicodemus history. The sixteen, however, along with other area blacks, determined to keep their hamlet from becoming an actual ghost town. They would be aided by the federal government routing a new two-lane highway through the town in the late 1950s. Although not quite the same as a modern day railroad (such a distinction would be accorded to the interstate system, which ran about thirty-five miles to the south), it still constituted a potentially major lifeline. Yet that failed to revive Nicodemus, and thus residents took the initiative in saving their community. Through their efforts, Nicodemus modernized—even if some preferred a more simplistic existence. The efforts to preserve the town did not go unnoticed, drawing the attention of several large newspapers, including the *New York Times* and the *Denver Post*, and the free publicity surely played a role in luring back to town former residents, the descendents of former residents, and even blacks who had only heard of the place but sought to escape the drudgeries of urban life.

More importantly for Nicodemus, the state and federal governments recognized the historical significance of this unique town and took measures to preserve it by naming Nicodemus as a place of historic interest. With the infusion of young blood, caring for buildings such as the town hall and Z. T. Fletcher's hotel became a priority, and led by the energetic Angela Bates-Tompkins, Nicodemus earned the distinction of being designated a National Historic Site in 1996. After droughts, blizzards, railroads, dust storms, the Great Depression, and the lure of opportunities in big cities had attempted to destroy Nicodemus, this designation ensured that the town's history would be preserved forever.

By the time John F. Kennedy entered the White House, Nicodemus continued to struggle. Although the Rural Electrification Administration, a New Deal creation operated by the Department of Agriculture, had finally arrived in Nicodemus, few houses actually possessed such power by 1958, and they still used kerosene lamps for lighting.[1] Of those who did have power, not all were impressed. Mrs. Ola Wilson told a reporter, "In the old days of Nicodemus, in my teens, we had boyfriends to be with, a lot of fun. Now we have television. The boyfriends were more fun."[2] Despite the excruciatingly slow progress, this did signal that modern convenience was coming to town. In the meantime, however, the residents would have to continue to survive without electric streetlights, telephone service, or even indoor plumbing. For water, residents had to go to the well near the township hall that had been constructed nearly eighty years prior.[3]

In addition to electricity's partial arrival, the federal government also announced in the late 1950s that U.S. Highway 24 would run to the north of Nicodemus. Ora Switzer was among those who, though unsure of what the future held in store for her town, possessed confidence that it would at the very least help it survive.[4] The announcement of a thoroughfare did not necessarily evoke excitement from all of its residents, however. Clementine Vaughn never owned a car and never learned to drive. "When the cars came out," she said, "I was afraid of them and just never wanted to learn" to drive.[5] But other than the erection of a gas station and a barbeque stand by the middle of the 1960s that had signaled the onset of better times, the expected revitalization failed to materialize.[6]

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[1] Fly, 76.
[2] *Hill City Times*, 15 May 1958.
[3] *Hill City Times*, 7 July 1960.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Hill City Times*, undated, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[6] *Kansas City Times*, 2 August 1965; *Salina Journal*, 16 February 1964.

To add to the woes, the elementary school, with just twelve pupils, shut its doors, and the young students were then bussed five miles to Bogue. Like their post office, those of Nicodemus desperately wanted the school to survive, but there was no justification for it. For the original settlers, the school system was second in importance only to establishing a proper church, and those who remained were determined to fight for it.[7] Unfortunately, though, no matter how much desire to preserve it existed, the school was yet one more institution that the town could no longer support. Nicodemus even struggled to host a minister for the Baptist church. While the church remained the focal point of the community for both spiritual and social needs, pastor David Helm moved with his wife and two children to Hill City in 1966.[8] The lack of good news did not discourage hardened residents like former postmaster Joe Wilson, who told a newspaper, "Tell them we're still hanging on."[9] At the halfway point of the decade, twelve families resided in Nicodemus while another eighty lived on surrounding farms.[10]

Nicodemus was largely insulated from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Residents considered their town to be an "oasis of freedom" as others of their race struggled to obtain the rights these descendants of pioneers had exercised for years. No white person could tell them what to do.[11] The awareness raised by Martin Luther King, Jr., however, did have an impact on the area. Blacks no longer ate in the kitchens of Hill City's restaurants as Mr. Lowell Beecher had said was the case during his youth, and blacks and whites sat together in the county seat's theater.[12] All the schools in Bogue and Hill City had long been integrated, so there was no strife between black and white students sitting in the same classroom. Local blacks must have

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[7] *Hill City Times*, 7 July 1960.
[8] *Kansas City Times*, 30 July 1983; *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 1 February 1987.
[9] *Salina Journal*, 16 February 1964.
[10] *Kansas City Times*, 2 August 1965.
[11] *Wichita Eagle*, 29 July 2005.
[12] Lowell Beecher of Hill City, KS, interview by author, 11 April 2007.

been content with their treatment, for when a chapter of the NAACP was formed in the 1960s, it quickly died due to a lack of interest.[13] Only in the 1990s was there ever a contentious race-related issue, and the matter of dispute concerned the failure of Unified School District #281 to have no school in observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Rev. Maurice Miller of Manhattan, who traveled to Nicodemus on weekends for services, threatened a protest but dropped the plan when he was convinced the students would learn about the great leader and the civil rights movement through classroom projects.[14] Though Graham County had fully integrated during this period, unfortunately, it did not mean that racist attitudes held by ignorant individuals in the area had been erased.[15]

Despite having lost their school and even the live-in pastor for their church, Nicodemus residents kept their faith that all would turn out well. The population had actually increased from the meager sixteen people of the early 1950s, and as the 1960s progressed, a handful of people, usually former residents, had returned to their roots. Little in the town, however, had actually changed. But by 1970, the leadership that a young resident had called for after the post office's closing some fifteen years before had finally stirred to action.

With no school, no live-in minister, and a highway that had failed to produce any notable commercial activity, initiative could no longer be delayed. Meeting at Ora Switzer's home in December 1969, six residents developed a plan that would give Nicodemus a renewed

[13] "Lonely in Negro Town," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.

[14] *Wichita Eagle*, 17 January 1997. The superintendent of schools at the time, Thomas Heiman, explained to the newspaper, "We respect the day, but we feel you can do more things to get kids to understand the value of Martin Luther King Day by them being in school." The school district has recently decided to have no school on the holiday.

[15] Having been a student of the Hill City schools, the author personally knew of peers who had no qualms using racial slurs. The author is also aware of several adults—often kin of his peers—who were prone to denigrating local blacks, including the usage of "Niggerdemus."

stimulus.[16] The first item on the agenda was to acquire funds for a new low-cost housing project for those who either no longer wanted to live alone or could no longer afford to do so. Convincing the government to finance the project was no easy task. In fact, when Lois Alexander and a companion requested a ten-unit housing development before the Kansas City branch of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the request amused the officials. "They just laughed at us and thought we were wasting their time," Alexander reported. "That just spurred me on."[17] The undeterred woman earned the attention of the Kansas City office when she traveled to Washington, D.C. and lobbied for the funds in the nation's capital. Even Hill City's mayor, R. J. McCauley offered any support he could provide in Alexander's efforts.[18] Affirming that white people would not be discriminated against if they applied to live in the housing, HUD allotted $140,000 for the project.[19] In addition to the housing, a new community building and other structures were also budgeted with the funding, but they had to be scrapped due to the rising costs of the housing development.[20]

The housing project created a buzz in the community. With continued effort, even better things might come to town. Ora Switzer believed the low-rent housing could lure many retirees to Nicodemus, and with some vision and entrepreneurship involving the town's rich history, "turn our memories into lucrative reality! Our population is bound to grow."[21] Guy Redd, the township's treasurer, was also optimistic, talking of attracting a new gas station, store, and a restaurant with what would certainly be an influx of immigrants.[22] And the idea of incorporating

[16] Fly, 78.
[17] *Hill City Times*, 17 August 1976.
[18] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 28 March 1971.
[19] *Hill City Times*, 17 August 1976.; *Hill City Times*, 27 July 1972. Desperate for any kind of support, those in Nicodemus were ready to welcome any white person—or person of any race—into their community. Nevertheless, Nicodemus remains composed of just black persons. *Kansas City Times*, 30 July 1983.
[20] *Hill City Times*, 17 August 1976.
[21] *Hill City Times*, 27 July 1972.
[22] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 28 March 1971.

this small community began to be discussed. After nearly seven years of work, construction of the complex boasting five duplexes was scheduled to be completed on the first of October 1976, with the first elderly tenants to move in shortly thereafter.[23] Grace VanDuvall, the first resident in the homes, voiced her approval of her new abode.[24]

Not since Nicodemus was possessed by railroad fever had there been this kind of excitement among its residents. As unrealistic as the optimism might have been, it was reasonable. For all of the unfortunate events that Nicodemus had witnessed since the railroads bypassed the town, being excited about a simple housing project and the ensuing dreams of what it might bring could be expected. The amazing thing is that, although Nicodemus never approached the grandiose visions picturing the arrival of hundreds of blacks and new businesses (essentially, the way the town was in 1886), numerous blacks did return to the town, pulled by what it represented and by the desire to escape the hectic urban lifestyle.

Having made Nicodemus a more hospitable place to live for new residents, and as more people filtered in, preserving treasured buildings became a paramount concern. This had been an issue since the 1950s. Many buildings, including ones that had been standing since the community's formative years, had fallen into disrepair during the arduous first half of the century. Pastor L. C. Alexander of the First Baptist Church organized volunteers to replace the old structure with a new one. The workers came from as far as Wichita and even California, with donations of money and supplies coming from those across the nation who maintained ties to the community.[25]

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[23] *Hill City Times*, 9 September 1976.

[24] *Hill City Times*, 25 January 1977.

[25] *Hill City Times*, 21 August 1975. Alexander owned a construction business in Wichita which he operated during the week to earn a living. He drove to Nicodemus on Sundays.

Unfortunately, few had the ability to arrange the kind of support given to the First Baptist Church. As a result, many buildings that had not already collapsed were condemned and razed as a matter of public safety. With the assistance of the Afro-American Bicentennial Corporation, residents prepared a nomination to be listed as an historic district on the National Register of Historical Places.[26] In 1976, the National Parks Service agreed that Nicodemus was worthy of the honor. Although the rate of bulldozing decrepit buildings dropped as residents began taking initiative to preserve what was left, a lack of care still resulted in the occasional loss of a dwelling in the 1970s. Hattie Burney lamented the loss of important buildings, pleading, "The old people out of slavery didn't understand, but there is no excuse now!"[27] To prevent the loss of additional buildings, La Barbara Fly of San Antonio came to Nicodemus to assist in securing federal aid, but dealing with the bureaucracy was agonizingly slow, sometimes taking a year for forms to be processed.[28] Despite the delays in getting much-needed money, the industrious people took whatever action they could in the upkeep of the town's structures.

The restoration of buildings and other general improvements to the town over the course of the decade proved crucial in coaxing outsiders to move to Nicodemus and call it home. Houses were weather-proofed to protect against the harsh elements, electricity became ubiquitous, sewer and water systems were installed in homes—residents no longer had to draw water from the well near the township hall—and the Department of Housing and Urban Development allotted funds for the pavement of the dusty streets and the installment of curbs on the sides by 1980.[29] Amenities that had been commonplace in other area communities for years, these improvements were a source of pride for the long-time residents. A town that was declared

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[26] Fly, 78.
[27] *Hill City Times*, 2 June 1977.
[28] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 1 February 1987.
[29] Fly, 79; "Nicodemus Working to be Full-fledged Town," County History, File 11, GCHS.

all but dead a few decades before, luxuries such as indoor plumbing and streets that no longer muddied after downpours proved there was a small yet vibrant life in Nicodemus after all.

The older residents understood the importance of such upgrades in helping their hometown become a place where others would want to live, but the elders did not view them as necessities. As Ola Wilson had lamented the advent of the television in Nicodemus, she also expressed disdain for the costs of cooling her home through an air conditioner, preferring the sod houses of yore. “A sod house is cool in the summer and warm in the winter,” she said. “I wouldn’t have the gas bills I have now. But nobody knows how to build them anymore.”[30] Wilson’s reminiscing of olden days, when it was easy to fish in the Solomon River before it was dammed to create Webster Reservoir and sod houses abounded, served to remind others that even in the last quarter of the twentieth century when materialism was running rampant, modern *conveniences* did not mean they were *necessities*. But for the survival of Nicodemus, such conveniences were of vital importance if the community was going to be able to draw those who had moved away and had not lived without something as simplistic as indoor plumbing.

Perhaps, though, the greatest tool in recruiting new residents, was the celebration of Emancipation Day, which had its name changed to Homecoming and was celebrated on the last weekend of July rather than on August 1. The event, playing host to hundreds of former residents and their descendents, served as a showcase of what Nicodemus had to offer. Returning to a modernized, peaceful community that still possessed the old, traditional spirit convinced many to decide Nicodemus was home.

Homecoming, combined with the federally funded housing and other grants for such improvement projects paid dividends with the return of former residents or their descendants.

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[30] Tim Johnson, “Hallowed Hopes Born Again in a Dying Town,” *Us Weekly*, 11 July 1978, 62.

When the application process for the grants began in the early 1970s, Ora Switzer held hope that it could bring good things for her community. "We had forty-five children here at one time," she explained to the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*. "They went away to school and work and then they married and stayed away. We may not be able to keep the young from going, but we can get the old to come back."[31] Others were hesitant to embrace the idea of a return of great numbers. Undoubtedly, some elderly residents shared Lois Alexander's sentiments when she said, "People are gradually coming back. So many are sick of the pressures of town. We don't want to bring so many back that we won't have peace and quiet, though."[32] Alexander and others wanted the new blood in the community so it could survive, but it is clear that she feared that the town could change into something she would not recognize if the influx of population was too great. Nevertheless, by the start of the 1990s, Ora Switzer proved to be quite prescient. She noted in the late 1980s that the children were coming back instead of permanently leaving, and the town had a significant increase in population. She was hopeful that more would return because of the town's heritage or strong faith and a dedication to hard work.[33]

Whatever the reasons, they emigrated back to Nicodemus. Many returned because of the bonds that were never quite severed when they left the place where they spent their childhood. Clint Bates, who had returned in 1973, explained, "It was always my dream as a kid to come back. I remember how hard I cried when we moved to California. . . . I didn't want to go. I guess there was something in me even then, that said I just wanted to be back home."[34] Others came to escape the pressures of urban life, particularly the violence. Frank Dowdell moved with his wife from San Diego when he was mugged and beaten for twenty dollars. The couple had actually

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[31] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 28 March 1971.
[32] *Hill City Times*, 9 September 1976.
[33] *Hays Daily News*, 1 February 1987.
[34] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 28 July 1985.

sent their son before them to avoid trouble, and Dowdell said, "Out here you can keep your individuality and your dignity. People know you and use your name when they talk to you. . . . Everybody really cares how you're doing."[35] Residents who had returned from the cities were discouraged by what they had witnessed, where "the children are raising the children."[36] Another parent was hopeful that her sons would grow up in Nicodemus, saying, "I sure don't want them in the city."[37] Freddie Switzer, baffled by inner-city violence while Nicodemus could remain so peaceful, encouraged anyone to come, believing anyone could make a good life in Nicodemus, "if they put their mind to it . . . If the decent moral people come here, I think they could make it. Church people. People willin' to go out and get a job."[38]

Within two years of the Dowdells' arrival, ten more families had joined them, bringing either skills or retirement money.[39] One person who brought her skills to town was Ernestine VanDuval. She left Pasadena, California, after her husband, who had worked the gates at the Rose Bowl, passed away in the late 1970s. She, too, was happy to reside in the small town where "there's no crime or drugs or breaking into houses."[40] She opened the first business in ten years on the townsite, Ernestine's Bar-B-Que.[41] The restaurant proved popular not only in Nicodemus, but also among area residents, as well. Nevertheless, even in 1987, residents were still "learning to live off a little."[42]

Even those who continued to live elsewhere devised a plan to maintain their connections to Nicodemus. A corporation, Nicodemus West, Inc., was created by residents on the West Coast to contribute to the town's well-being. Based in Los Angeles, its mission is "to assist in business

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[35] *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 21 August 1994.
[36] *Hill City Times*, 1 February 1977.
[37] Ibid.
[38] *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 1 February 1987.
[39] *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 21 August 1994.
[40] *Hays Daily News*, 31 July 1977.
[41] Fly, 79. After Ernestine passed away in 2002, close friends decided to move the establishment to Bogue.
[42] *Hays Daily News*, 1 February 1987.

education, provide scholarships and personal loans, and finance improvement projects for their homeplace."[43] Most everyone associated with the community wanted to assist in Nicodemus's revitalization, and their generosity came as no surprise given the close-knit nature of the town and the tradition started by the first residents of helping brothers and sisters in need.

By the time the Berlin Wall had been torn down, Nicodemus had seemingly stabilized with the surge in residents—though it never exceeded fifty people—and the community was safe from even the threat of extinction for at least another generation. But for some, particularly Angela Bates-Tompkins, who had returned to Nicodemus after pursuing careers in Washington, D.C. and Denver, protecting the past was just as important as insuring the future. Already on the National Register of Historical Places, she set her sights on Nicodemus being designated a prestigious National Historic Site and gaining the extra funds that comes with such an honor.[44] Not only would buildings dating back to the nineteenth century be saved, but tourists might also provide a boon for the local economy.

Earning this distinction, however, would be no easy feat. Not only does the National Parks Service have to conduct studies determining the historical value of a potential site, but Congress must also agree to a site's nomination.[45] Undaunted, Bates-Tompkins and her cousin John Ella Holmes discussed the matter with members of the Congressional Black Caucus, appearing before congressional committees, and also arguing Nicodemus's cause before the National Historic Trust. Kansas Senator Robert Dole, the leader of the Republican minority in that body, would prove to be instrumental in reaching the goal. He requested the Interior Department to review the matter, and he freed money in a spending bill for the study.[46] Bates-

[43] Fly, 77.
[44] "Status Banking Report, 1992," Nicodemus Papers, County History, File 11, GCHS.
[45] *Wichita Eagle*, 22 December 1991.
[46] *Wichita Eagle*, 22 September 1991.

Tompkins stated, "We feel the only way Nicodemus is going to have a future is through historic preservation."[47] This urgency was duly noted, for the following summer, Senator Dole and officials from the Department of Interior addressed those gathered for the Homecoming about the possibility of becoming a National Historic Site.[48]

Although hopeful that Nicodemus might receive the special designation by the end of 1992, the process was quite tedious. As the study progressed and cautious optimism pervaded among the residents of Nicodemus, awaiting word from the National Parks Service resembled awaiting the railroads. Just as they had recognized how important a railroad through town would be for its prosperity, everyone in the community understood the benefits that would come from being awarded the honor. But there were those who were suspicious of what being a National Historic Site would entail. Though they wanted the town to be preserved, landowners did not want to forfeit their titles to the government.[49]

Despite the concerns of some, the campaign pushed forward. In October 1996, Nicodemus residents received word that their efforts had not been in vain; they would become a National Historic Site and have its treasured buildings preserved for posterity. With the funds also came an increased visibility on the national stage as those who may have had only superficial knowledge of the town would know that it truly was an historical treasure. This would potentially boost tourism which in turn could bring money to the economically struggling community. Ernestine VanDuvall was ecstatic, telling the *Wichita Eagle*, "With the floods, the fires and the earthquakes, they all get something from the government for a disaster and Nicodemus has been a disaster for a long time. . . . It's time for Nicodemus to get something."[50]

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[47] *Wichita Eagle*, 22 December 1991.
[48] *Wichita Eagle*, 1 August 1992.
[49] *Wichita Eagle*, 6 July 1993.
[50] *Wichita Eagle*, 4 October 1996.

The following month, President Bill Clinton signed the decree making the designation official. Alleviating the fears of the aforementioned landowners, the National Parks Service would care for only five buildings: the First Baptist Church built in 1880, the St. Francis Hotel which had also served as the town's first post office, the first schoolhouse built in Graham County, the African Methodist Episcopal Church erected in the mid-1880s, and the WPA-funded township hall.

Although designated in the latter portion of 1996, Nicodemus did not officially celebrate until Homecoming Weekend in 1998 when one thousand people of all races arrived to partake in the festivities. With the visitor's center ready to open, Nicodemus prepared to play host to visitors from across the nation interested in the history of the only surviving all-black town west of the Mississippi River. Angela Bates-Tompkins, now president of the Nicodemus Historical Society, remarked, "This celebration is for the people who had the vision to see this community of 120 years ago as a place to live. They are the ones rejoicing today. We are here to show their vision was not in vain."[51]

Nicodemus has capitalized on the interest in the town. Bates-Tompkins worked to market Ernestine VanDuvall's barbeque sauce, even selling 1,200 bottles around the area. Furthermore, five area farmers established the Nicodemus Flour Co-op in 2000 and took their wheat to a local mill which made 250 three-pound flour containers and quickly sold out.[52] The "Promised Land Flour" is popularly used for pancakes. In non-culinary matters, in 2005, Nicodemus earned the distinction of being named as one of fifteen national sites of diversity in the nation—and the only

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[51] *Wichita Eagle*, 2 August 1998.

[52] *Wichita Eagle*, 26 May 2002. Only four black farmers, including the famed Veryl Switzer who drove from Manhattan to tend his farm on the weekends, continue to work the land of their ancestors. Other blacks own the land surrounding Nicodemus, but they rent it out to others.

site in the Midwest—as judged by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.[53] Through the promotional efforts of the residents, which includes not only marketing foods but also holding a jazz festival in June and Pioneer Days in October, and also through the recognition of the government and other groups that shines a spotlight on the town, Nicodemus lures visitors who might one day become residents. At the very least, those who do venture to the community in northwest Kansas gain a deep understanding that it is a treasure of American history.

Had it not been for some industrious residents, however, Nicodemus might likely be a ghost town rather than a National Historic Site. In the span of fifty years, the proud settlers worked to revive their hometown after the government closed their post office and left Nicodemus without an official institution—excepting the school with but a handful of pupils which also had to be shuttered. They took it upon themselves to seek and receive federal funding for a new housing complex to which the poor could retire, as well as acquiring funding that paved the streets and helped bring indoor plumbing to the old homes. They modernized a community that had not been living all that differently from when the first ex-slaves and their children settled Nicodemus. The residents also took the important step of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the first step in becoming a National Historic Site. As a result of their labors, those who returned for Homecoming Weekend found it to be a desirable place to return to, either for sentimental purposes or to escape the crime-ridden streets of the metropolises in which they had resided. Once a few more people immigrated to Nicodemus, the work was not over. Angela Bates-Tompkins dared to dream that she could convince Congress and the National Parks Service to declare her hometown a National Historic Site. She furiously lobbied anyone who would listen, and with the support of Senator Bob Dole, the fruits of her

[53] *Wichita Eagle*, 22 May 2005.

exertions can still be witnessed today as five buildings protected by the National Parks Service—four of which date back to the town's first decade—remain standing.

They could have moved away when times had gotten difficult and come back for the Homecoming celebrations at the end of July. The residents, however, characteristically chose to stay and fight for their town and preserve what it represented. Their seemingly innate determination emerged even a century after it arrived inside the first settlers of Nicodemus. If the occasion to fight ever arises again, those who follow will do likewise.

CONCLUSION

THE SPIRIT OF NICODEMUS

The image of a group of blacks camped out in the middle of a desolate plain is an astonishing picture of how a truly unique community began. Former slaves seeking to flee the harassment of their Kentucky neighbors paid five dollars—for most, practically all they had—for a journey to a place that, according to its promoters, was a virtual replica of the Garden of Eden. Yet when they arrived on the Great Plains where the new townsite was to be located, the pioneers quickly realized that it was no Eden but rather, in the words of W. L. Sayers, "the Great American Desert, a wild country from which antelope and the buffalo had not disappeared—a country dominated by cowboys and occupied by cattle ranches."[1] Many returned to Kentucky. Most stayed, partly because they did not have the means to return but primarily because Kansas represented freedom. To endure "a country infested with rattle snakes, coyotes and tarantulas, pestered by fleas and damned by Kansas drouths,"[2] they found comfort in their temporary dugout homes by believing that God would see them through the calamities they faced. The colonists further believed that this would be the place they would find opportunities to own the land they worked and enjoy a life in which they were not subjugated to the wishes of white men. Indeed, although deceived by W. R. Hill's promotions of the area's grandeur, in Kansas, numerous whites provided aid to the struggling community and when times boomed, whites even invested in Nicodemus themselves.

These ex-slaves possessed the mental and physical abilities to succeed in a foreign region despite living in a period when whites generally believed blacks to be mentally inferior. If whites at the time thought blacks would fail on their own on the Plains, they greatly underestimated the

[1] Sayers, *Bogue Messenger*, 18 February 1932.
[2] Ibid.

fortitude of these blacks. Determined to stay no matter what they endured—be it blistering heat, lengthy blizzards, or a scarcity of food—those who founded and developed Nicodemus proved themselves more than competent in surviving and developing their community on their own. They established the county's first school district, organized the local government, took part in county politics and gave Hill City the decisive advantage in the county seat fight, and saw a key settler become the first black to hold public office in the state. They alone were responsible for Nicodemus's boom in the 1880s. The white entrepreneurs who established businesses in town arrived only after the industry of the blacks had built the foundation for economic success. Many a pioneer community of whites could not boast these kinds of accomplishments!

The very notion of such success happening in their native South would have been anathema. Hence, the memories of the oppression they suffered directly contributed to the survival of Nicodemus through its difficult first years. For five dollars, they bought an opportunity to practice their rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution in a state where blacks seeking asylum from southern terror were generally welcomed. Although some pioneers came to Nicodemus and opted to return to Kentucky, for those who stayed in Kansas, there is no record of these first settlers ever considering what might happen if Nicodemus failed. They likely would have done as others did later, heading farther west to Colorado or even to the Pacific Coast—but definitely not returning to the South. There is no record of such thoughts, however, because failure was never an option for those who made it their home in late 1877 and early 1878. Like most blacks in that period, they had faith that God would deliver them from hardship. What differentiated the settlers of Nicodemus, though, was their belief that life in Kansas—no matter how difficult—was better than life in the South, and they possessed a steely resolve to improve their lots on the Great Plains. The misery of the weather, wild animals, and even the fear of

hostile Indians could never match the misery of being constantly humiliated in the South on the account of their skin color. The experiences of the South created the determination to withstand the elements and serve as the foundation for a better future. The determination to preserve Nicodemus would be the one characteristic constantly present over the course of Nicodemus's existence, even into the twenty-first century.

The ingrained determination paid dividends as Nicodemus quickly emerged as a boom town in the 1880s. With political clout and a healthy economy, the community served as a model for the county's other nascent villages, such as Gettysburg, Roscoe, and Hill City. The only thing keeping Nicodemus from having a bright future guaranteed was the absence of a railroad. Again, the settlers were willing to go to great lengths to secure a line through town, offering to raise $16,000 to help a company finance the project. Certain that they would lure one of several companies to Nicodemus, the disappointment was immense when every railroad company bypassed the community. In later years, residents accused J. P. Pomeroy and W. R. Hill of arranging the Union Pacific to stay south of the Solomon River before crossing to the north bank to run near Hill City. While the charges cannot be completely discounted, the large investments Pomeroy had in Nicodemus made them unlikely. Regardless of who was to blame for losing out on a crucial lifeline, the lack of a railroad, combined with poor harvests, induced the boom town to bust. Even prior to the railroad's bypassing the town, the newspaper *Western Cyclone* had taken note of the abating activity in the town while observing Hill City was conversely bustling. Some residents looked for more promising prospects elsewhere, and businesses followed suit, often moving to nearby Bogue or Hill City.

The decline had begun, but it would be another half-century before the community teetered on the brink of collapse. Other hamlets in Graham County faded quickly when they

failed to attract a railroad. Roscoe and Gettysburg cannot be found on a present day road atlas, and neither can the onetime county seat of Millbrook, which desperately needed a railroad to help it rebuild after a tornado leveled nearly all of it in 1887. The people of these towns drifted into Hill City, now well on its way to being the predominant locale for county activity. Other towns in Kansas and elsewhere met the same fate when they could not entice a railroad company to lay track next to their town. For most any small pioneer community in the West, the railroad determined which towns survived and which did not.

Nicodemus bucked the trend of towns dying without a railroad and did not fade into oblivion. Though it cannot be said that the town overcame the loss of the railroad since the bypassing, after all, served as the catalyst for Nicodemus being as it is today. Yet the economic adversity faced in the 1890s and into the twentieth century paled in comparison to the actual life and death struggle Nicodemus residents endured when they first set up camp on the north bank of the Solomon River. As a result, the gradual yet steady emigration provoked no urgent response until the 1950s when the future of Nicodemus appeared to be in peril. The slow migration away from Nicodemus immediately following the boom did not seem as important as the abandonment by businesses. By 1910, Nicodemus and the surrounding township still boasted a population of around five hundred persons, a modest yet healthy number.

Being a town founded by blacks for blacks made it unique, but Nicodemus's experiences suggest that it was much like many other frontier towns. Like in other black communities, the church served as a focal point for spiritual, cultural, and social needs, and building a proper house of worship received the highest priority. Establishing a school for the children was nearly as important. Furthermore, its boom period in the 1880s attracted the same individuals that drifted into other thriving communities such as Abilene and Dodge City. Its residents played an

important role in the heated campaign by determining which town would be Graham County's seat, and even its decline after the railroad bypassed it is not much different from other town ignored by the railroad companies. Yet those who lived there possessed a spirit that is difficult to find elsewhere.

Nicodemus retained a large number of black settlers because of its unique identity. Those who had been shackled by the chains of slavery and then observed firsthand how Nicodemus grew through hard work could not easily leave when modestly lean times had returned. They understood what Nicodemus represented, and no one could easily turn his or her back on the town where they first enjoyed their freedoms. Furthermore, the black town served as the only center for blacks to freely socialize. Whereas the white residents of towns like Roscoe and Gettysburg could easily move to Hill City or Morland or Bogue and effortlessly meld into those societies, the county's blacks—even the handful who lived in Hill City—likewise gravitated to Nicodemus for social functions, particularly church services. And, obviously, the convenient method to remaining close to the center of the county's black society was to live in Nicodemus. Moving away from Nicodemus when it was still in its infancy and suffering growing pains risked earning the enmity of those who stayed in place. When a person in this period sought opportunities elsewhere, the decision had better have been justified by a very good reason. It usually was, but even those who left were forever tied to Nicodemus.

Only when the Great Depression began and the dust storms arrived with southerly winds did the exodus truly begin. Too busy attempting to protect themselves against the suffocating clouds of dust, as well as working the land and any other job that could put food on the table, the residents who refused to leave their homes did not have the time to convince others to stay. When the Second World War began, the youth deserted Nicodemus to find jobs in the war

industries or sign up for military service. The adults certainly were never going to stand in the way of someone compelled to aid in the war effort. The problem was that the youth never returned, and by 1950, only sixteen people remained in Nicodemus. Yet the sixteen had spent a significant portion of their lives—if not the entirety—in this community, and they drew upon the faith and determination of the original settlers to preserve their hometown. Nicodemus was too important to them for it to be abandoned to the weeds.

Nicodemus residents focused on reviving their all-but-dead town in the 1950s and 1960s while the rest of black America was engrossed in the civil rights movement. The bus boycotts, the sit-ins, and the marches were something only to be read about or listened to on the radio, or, for the rare few, watched on television. It does not need to be mentioned that sympathy and spiritual support was offered from those in the only surviving all-black town west of the Mississippi. Why did the blacks of Nicodemus and the surrounding area avoid the fight that millions of their brethren had to assume? Blacks had been in the area prior to when Graham County was formally erected, meaning most whites were comfortable with their presence. It quickly grew to become the second largest community in the county, and most all of the residents did nothing to earn a label of being "dumb" ex-slaves. On the contrary, they acquitted themselves excellently, erecting the county's first school district, taking part in politics, improving their homesteads, and establishing businesses. Perhaps most importantly, almost without exception, when blacks journeyed to Millbrook—and eventually Hill City—for official business, they never caused any trouble. Indeed, these were God-fearing teetotalers who accorded respect from whites by conducting themselves in a civil manner. Thus, years of interaction produced nothing but cordial relations between the two races. When the civil rights movement began in the South and moved to northern urban areas such as Newark, Chicago,

Detroit, and Watts, blacks in this remote part of the country felt no need to fight for rights they already had. Despite the racist attitudes of a handful of whites, voting rights for the black population in Graham County had never been challenged by white supremacists, restaurants seamlessly transitioned to permitting blacks to dine with whites when it was apparent no one minded, and the schools had been integrated for as long as most anyone could remember. It can be recalled that a chapter of the NAACP failed to take root. There was no need for it. Some blacks expressed that they could feel the sense of superiority of whites when doing routine activities such as shopping for groceries, but no location is devoid of a few racists. Nevertheless, the racists were ignored because they were never a true threat. Nicodemus residents had more to concern themselves with than the opinions of a few ignorant white people in other towns.

With the closing of the post office in 1953 and the population below twenty, residents understood that they had to improve Nicodemus to save it, and the determination of the original settlers emerged once again. Those connected to the community returned once a year for the Emancipation Celebration, but few of the visitors from the West Coast and elsewhere considered staying there permanently when most houses lacked electricity and running water. The federal government took the first step—without request—in making Nicodemus a modern community when the Rural Electrification Administration began bringing electric power during Eisenhower's second term. By the end of the 1960s, every home in Nicodemus enjoyed receiving light from incandescent light bulbs, and residents took the initiative to seek more. They received federal funding for housing, indoor plumbing, and even paving the streets. The determination paid off, attracting blacks exhausted from the perils of urban life and seeking to reconnect with their roots. The population increased to a point where Nicodemus's survival was no longer in question. The ultimate security blanket, however, was the designation as a National Historic Site

for which Angela Bates-Tompkins and others campaigned so furiously. The preservation of five buildings—the First Baptist Church, the St. Francis Hotel, the first schoolhouse built in Graham County, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the township hall—ensured that Nicodemus's past was secure for present and future students of history to discover.

Permanent survival, however, is not guaranteed. Only around thirty persons presently call Nicodemus home, and most are older folks. Nicodemus faces the same obstacle to increasing its population as most any rural western Kansas town. There is simply little for Nicodemus or any other small community to offer young people; no opportunities to entice them to either move in or stay where they are. As the elderly pass away, new bodies must replace them. Although the Homecoming Weekend continues to draw hundreds, and monetary support comes from all across the nation, the ties to this town are regrettably not as strong as they were up through the 1970s. The slow pace of life in an agricultural community no longer holds much appeal for younger generations. Nevertheless, Nicodemus retains a mystique about it that all who are connected to the town recognize. "All our roots are here," says Avalon Switzer Brown, now of Arizona. "It's about legacy and a place for my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to see where their parents came from. It is home. I don't care how long you live in California or Arizona, Nicodemus is still home."[3] It is imperative that others understand this and that they want to make this town home in order for it to survive. If the point comes, though, where it is again on the brink of having no residents once and for all, those in Nicodemus will undoubtedly resolve to do whatever it takes to lure additional occupants.

Nicodemus offered ex-slaves an opportunity to escape the discrimination of the South and chart new lives in which they could experience true freedom. Such a dream had to be defended whenever it was threatened, and settlers acquired—or brought with them from

[3] *Wichita Eagle*, 30 July 2006.

Kentucky—a quiet determination which often called them to action over the course of Nicodemus's history. It is an intangible quality, but it undoubtedly exists or else Nicodemus would not. Nothing was easy for them. From accumulating five dollars for the journey west to spending half of a decade seeking federal funds for housing and other improvement projects a century later, they had to fight for what they had. It would have been easy to follow many others who eventually left to seek other opportunities, but the determination to remain at home and guide it through difficult times is a characteristic that makes the residents of Nicodemus unique. So many other Kansas boom towns of the late-nineteenth century faded into oblivion, but not Nicodemus. It remains inhabited to this day. Because of this distinguishing characteristic, which exists even in those who have any form of relationship to the town but live elsewhere, Nicodemus will surely continue to be a living town long into the future.

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