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Nicodemus, Kan., Struggles to Remain A Citadel of Hope

In All-Black Town, Ex-Slaves
Found a Home, Identity
And Some Peace of Mind

By DENNIS FARNEY

Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
NICODEMUS, Kan.—Every man was
own Moses here, searching for a per-
al promised land.

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

Remains of the Day

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

Nicodemus, billed by its 19th-century
promoters as "The Largest Colored Col-
ony in America," is fighting for its life.
The town and its surrounding farms total
more than 50 people. Its stores are gone,
its school long closed. Its vacant lots
are cluttered with old trucks and farm ma-
chinery. Its scattered houses could be en-
compassed in a few small blocks. Its only
assets are history itself—and a powerful
sense of community that keeps tugging ex-
tricate home.

Sixty-two-year-old Charlesetta Bates
comes home from Southern California,
where she kept house for the rich and fa-



rious and once served John Wayne her
people pie. Her sister Ernestine Van Duvall,
also has come back from California;
she made lemon pie for Walt Disney. Veryl
Switzer, a running back for the 1950s
Green Bay Packers, still journeys from his
administrative job at Kansas State Univer-
sity to his farm land just outside town.

Next month's annual homecoming, a
celebration not so much of a town but of an
extended family, will draw back hundreds
from as far away as both coasts. A public
television documentary is in the works.
Meanwhile Angela Bates, herself home to
nearby Hill City from stints in Washington,
D.C., and Denver, is dreaming even bigger
dreams.

Ms. Bates, 38, is pressing the Kansas
congressional delegation to have the town
declared a national historic site. "People
say there's nothing here," she says as
meadowlarks sing and the golden light of
late afternoon floods down on Mount Olive
cemetery. "But I feel so blessed that I
have Nicodemus. I have a place. I have
roots. I feel I've been selected to be from
this place."

There is something here that's rare in a
nation of interchangeable suburbs. It is a
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sense of identity and of the continuity of
history. Buried on Mount Olive's little hill-
top is Angela Bates's great-great-grand-
mother, America Bates. The name is ap-
propriate, for what has unfolded here is a
uniquely American story—and, argues
Princeton historian Nell Irvin Painter, an
overlooked one.

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

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

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

Willianna Hickman, a settler of 1878,
wrote of navigating across the open plains
by compass. Finally, she heard the joyful
shout: "There is Nicodemus!" Her account
continues: "I looked with all the eyes I
had. 'Where is Nicodemus? I don't see it.'
My husband pointed out various smokes
coming out of the ground. . . . The families
lived in dugouts. . . . I began to cry."

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

An enterprising former slave who had
no part in the initial settlements, Benjamin
"Pap" Singleton, began drumming up mi-
grations to Kansas so huge that the mi-
grants came to be called the Exodusters.
The Exoduster movement reached fever
pitch in 1879, when 15,000 blacks poured
into Kansas during a single four-month pe-
riod. Frederick Douglass, the national
black leader, deplored blacks' abandoning
the South "as Lot did Sodom." Congress
held worried hearings. The Kansas gover-
nor feared his young state was about to be
overwhelmed by the destitute. Ultimately,
the fears proved exaggerated: The move-
ment faded away after 1880.

A few Exodusters settled here, although
most gravitated toward Kansas' bigger cit-
ies. But even as the Exoduster movement
was peaking, Nicodemus was on the verge
of decline. Bypassed by the railroads in
1888, it began its century-long downward
spiral.

Historic-site designation would bolster
tourism by making at least portions of the
town a unit of the National Park Service,
most likely bringing in an interpretive cen-
ter and federal restoration money. It would
also serve to celebrate sheer endurance
and, some argue, a matter-of-fact confi-
dence that contrasts with the shrunken ho-
rizons and shriveled hopes of the inner cit-
ies. "Here," declares Ernestine Van Du-
vall, "we don't worry about what we can't
do. We just do."

"I've been through it all, honey," says
Ora Switzer, an indomitable 88-year-old
widow who volunteers that she is being
courted again. The mother of NFL football
player Veryl Switzer, she can recall work-
ing the fields by mule. She can also recall
what her parents would say when she
would complain of an aching back. "They
told me I didn't have any business knowing

I had a back."

Residents tend to discount racial dis-
crimination as a major problem in their
lives. True, along Highway 24 there is an
abandoned stone-lined cellar where, legend
has it, early Nicodemus residents would
spend the night after a shopping trip to the
neighboring town of Stockton: Blacks
didn't feel welcome in Stockton after sun-
down in those days. On the other hand,
black children have long joined with white
in school at the nearby town of Bogue, and
today Nicodemus residents mingle easily
with whites in area towns.

Hard times, not hard attitudes, have al-

ways been the biggest problem hereabouts.
"No one could afford to be prejudiced,"
says 64-year-old J.R. Bates, Angela's fa-
ther. Sitting in their living room, he and
his wife, Charlesetta, talk of growing up
in a time when houses were still heated
with dried chips of manure, and when ren-
dered skunk grease, rubbed on the chest,
was a treatment for colds. They talk of the
iron realities—few jobs and low wages—
that drove them to California. And of how,
when they came back to retire, the same
realities remained.

They have no desire to trace their roots
in the South. They are content to be here.

As they reminisce, a phonograph record
plays in the background: It is the Williams
Sisters, including Charlesetta Bates and
Ernestine Van Duvall, singing gospel mu-
sic. "We've come a long way, Lord," they
sing. "We've come a long way."