

RED, WHITE, AND BLACK
African Americans in the Old West

A Documentary Film
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In a fit of madness I one day said to the [white] man I rented from: 'It's no use, I works hard and raises big crops and you sells it and keeps the money, and brings me more and more in debt, so I will go somewhere else and try to make headway like white workingmen.

--Solomon Lewis, sharecropper
Tensas Parish, Louisiana, 1879

The 'somewhere else' was Kansas. Like thousands of other freed slaves, Lewis fled the poverty and KKK violence of the South to pioneer the plains frontier in the late 1870's. They called themselves 'exodusters', after the Biblical pilgrimage from Egypt.

RED, WHITE, AND BLACK, a 90-minute documentary film, chronicles the 400 year-old story of African Americans in the trans-Mississippi West--black Indians and explorers from the 1500's to the 1800's; miners in 1849; and soldiers, cowboys, pioneers, townbuilders, and outlaws from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Stories often excluded from history, but not lost or forgotten.

The old West has always been America's mythical age--larger-than-life heroes and villains, civilization against nature, the white man versus the Indian. The myth of the West, writes historian Philip Durham, is about "admiration for the Anglo-Saxon, for the conquering white man...for the plucky white race." The frontier is where America defines itself. The absence of blacks from this story is more than mere historical exclusion, it is an exclusion from our national identity.

RED, WHITE, AND BLACK, however, goes beyond the one-dimensionality and condescension of a "blacks were there too" approach. As it