

In Nicodemus, broken chains link a family of freedom

By JEFF SPIVAK
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NICODEMUS, Kan. — This isn't a particularly pleasant place to call home — three blocks of crumbling houses and weedy fields with no gas station, school or cafe and fewer than 50 residents.

But during the first weekend of August, the children of all-black Nicodemus come back. As if pulled by a magnet, they swell this town on the rolling prairie with their station wagons, campers and pickups, and with hugs, laughter and memories.

They gather for a reunion, of sorts. More than 100 years ago, former slaves homesteaded the spot, and it grew into the largest all-black town west of the Mississippi. Those who remain and who return are the descendants of those former slaves.

"We're all related in one way or another," said Kim Thomas, who grew up in Nicodemus and, like many of its sons and daughters, moved away.

Thomas sat under a tent this past weekend, swatting flies and talking with other third- and fourth-generation dwellers, some of the 200 former residents and their distant cousins who arrived from across the country.

They caught up with relatives they hadn't seen in years. They told stories of barefoot races at night along the unlighted roads. They reminisced about all the pumping they did on a well that sat just 20 feet away from them on a vacant lot.

The people of Nicodemus have held these get-togethers for 114

years now.

This town may not look like much anymore, but the feeling of home persists even for those who haven't had a relative here for decades. The flat western Kansas twang could be heard in many voices, except in those of the children who played in a park that is quiet most of the year.

"I'm proud to be black and to know there's someplace in the United States that was pioneered by blacks owning land," said Denise Glover of Cerritos, Calif. "There's some kind of spiritual thing. You come and you feel like family."

Earnestine Van Duvall, 71, is a matriarch of Nicodemus. If one buys some of the ribs she cooks — the same as those she cooked for years at Van Duvall's Bar-B-Q in Pasadena, Calif. — it takes little prodding for her to recount the town's history.

In 1877, Benjamin "Pap" Singleton, a freed slave, led a group of 30 freedmen from Kentucky to Kansas. It was 14 years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, but the group still sought a chance to be truly free.

The spot was one that white folks didn't want. The new settlers burrowed into the bald hills for homes and endured the harsh winters, hot summers and plagues of grasshoppers. The town was named Nicodemus, according to legend, after a passenger on one of the first slave ships to cross the Atlantic Ocean.

Nicodemus flourished at first,

with a hotel, bank, school, doctors, lawyers and even a literary society. What is now the annual homecoming began back then as an emancipation celebration.

Then the railroad bypassed Nicodemus. A town of 511 in 1907, Nicodemus fell to less than 100 by 1910. It lost its post office in 1953. In 1966, the grade school folded.

In part to keep the town from falling into oblivion, the federal government in the 1970s built 10 apartments for elderly residents.

A rejuvenation also began in 1976 when the town was named a national historic landmark. Since then its history buffs have pushed for national historic site status.

During last weekend's homecoming, Kansas Gov. Joan Finney and Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., stopped in to add their support. "There's those that say there's nothing left," Dole said. "My view is there still is a lot to preserve — the structures, the culture, the history."

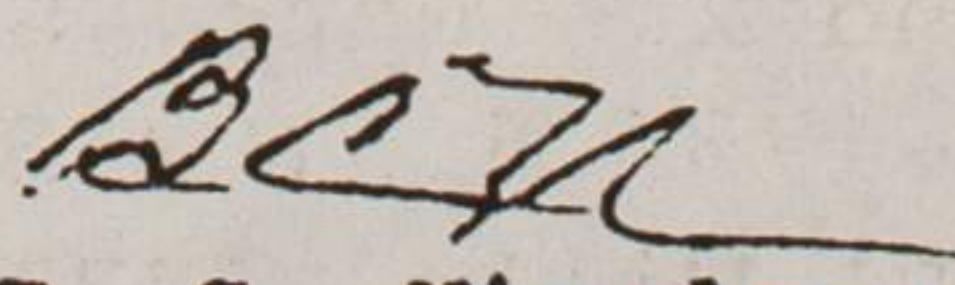
Catherine Finley, whose mother was born in Nicodemus and used to bring her to the annual homecoming as a child, sat in the shade of a tree and pondered the town's significance.

"We're funny about [Nicodemus]. We're proud of what the people who came here did — just to survive. It fell on hard times. This never has been or never will be anything more than a Kansas prairie town.

"But it's what we call home."

This appeared in the Roanoke Times and World News several days ago.

You probably have seen it before, if so, file 13.


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