Historical Background

The succeeding pages are a collection of both history and fiction. They include a timeline that places Cleage's fictional characters from Flyin' West into the context of real historical events, advertisements that these characters could have easily seen before moving to Nicodemus, pictures of settlers actually making the trek to Nicodemus, and a document that Miss Leah, Sophie, or earlier settlers could have participated to make. As you read the timeline, ask yourself how do these events affect the wisdom, the life experience, and perspective of the characters?

Despite the actual abolition of slavery in and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, The Civil War did not officially end until two years later. One important effort to reconcile the South after the Civil War was The Reconstruction Act of 1867. This federal legislation was devised by Lincoln and other statesmen to help the Southern states regroup economically and empower the entire country by granting civil rights to ex-slaves. Such civil rights were to promote the integration of black and white children in public schools, have blacks exercise their political voice by participating as voters and elected officials, and basically eradicate the inequalities that had been imposed on slaves.

Unfortunately, disgruntled ex-confederates fought against integration and moved for laws to suppress civil rights. These types of laws came under the name of "Jim Crow" and denied the rights of integrated marriages and the rights for blacks to convene in public places like movie theaters, restaurants, and civil service buildings. In the play, Frank Charles makes reference to such segregation as he recounts his train ride to Nicodemus. Because of his fair complexion he befriends several white men to play a game of poker and pretends not to know his own wife who is visibly African American. Not until 1955, ninety years after slavery had ended, did pioneers like Rosa Parks and other civil rights protesters put an end to segregation and other inequalities.