

WOMAN

Well, that's how it started. Promoters urging my great-grandparents to head on out to Kansas, along with hundreds of other former slaves who wanted to establish their own farms and towns. My great-grandmother was one who went, and we've been here ever since. She gave birth right here in Nicodemus, northwest of here in a field. First child born in the settlement, named him Henry. This is her quilt, pieced by her own hand. I'm just doing some mending on it.

(Woman exits, leaving quilt on chair, singing earlier song trailing off as she goes.)

(Lights out on chair area; up on Prentis.)

(Enter Noble Prentis, a Kansas journalist, with an old-fashioned standing camera. He sets it up and takes several "photos," which are simultaneously displayed via slide projection at rear of stage [Stage directions will specify "photo" when one is shot.]

PRENTIS

(Photo of Kansas City, Mo. of the time, preferably with first group of black colonists to Kansas.)

I do believe I witnessed the first group of black settlers to arrive in Kansas. There were already black residents in Kansas, but these were settlers, wanting to form their own towns. 1873. Don't remember the month. Kansas City, Missouri, is where I saw them. They were mostly field hands from Tennessee and headed to Cherokee County in southeastern Kansas. But another group came, heading northwest. That's the story I'm following.

PRENTIS

(acknowledging audience)

Get my pictures here, then be on my way. Don't let me disturb your view.

PRENTIS

Not a very pretty sight. (Photo.) See for yourself. That's what the Solomon Valley of Kansas looks like in July of 1881. This is my first trip to Nicodemus. Settlers have been here for four years now. As I headed west from Atchison, things looked like I was used to in Kansas. Then as I headed out of Stockton, the countryside began to change like it was a different country. Not a tree in sight. Well, that's hyperbole. A tree here and there. But nothing even resembling a wooded area. Now, I'm not a farmer. But just by gazing on the soil, it seems less fertile to me. Here, in the low bluffs on each side of the Solomon river--(photo) "a compromise between a clay bank and a stone quarry." Seems to me to be more suited to growing wild grasses than anything else.

ESTHER

(Enters in 1880's style dress and begins piecing quilt just as he is finishing his line.)