Black Pioneers Of The Old West

By David M. Warren

One of the most common misconceptions about the black experience in America is the mistaken notion that following the close of the Civil War the only important flow of black migrants was from the South to the North.

This notion is grossly misleading.

For during the latter part of the 1800s, thousands upon thousands of poor black families left the South and headed West instead of coming North. These black Americans became cattle ranchers, businessmen, and tillers of the soil.

They were the black pioneers.

Brave black men and brave black women were willing to face the unknown dangers of the Western frontier in order to make a better way of life for themselves.

In 1879, so many black families left the South and settled in the state of Kansas that this mass exodus caused a Congressional investigation. The purpose of the investigation was to determine whether or not this huge movement of Southern blacks was part of a political plot aimed at relocating the blacks for the purpose of garnering their votes at election time.

The Senate investigation failed to prove this contention.

To a man, the black witnesses who were called before the investigating committee all testified that freedom from the white man's violent oppression and the opportunity to own a piece of land of their own were the sole reasons why they had settled in Kansas.

North, these sturdy black souls had looked to the West as their Promised Land.

Just like thousands of white Americans were doing at that very same time.

Of course, not-all of the blacks who left the South and migrated to the West, PAGE 4



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settled in the state of Kansas. Many of them settled down in the state of Oklahoma while some of them pushed even further West and settled down in states like Colorado. It was the first large influx of blacks into the West and the black population of the Western states was soon counted by the thousands instead of by the hundreds.

The stage for this great black migration was set as a result of the presidential election of 1876.

And compared to the 1876 presidential election, the Watergate shenanigans of President Richard M. Nixon's 1972 election was a Sunday school picnic. By back-room wheeling and dealing, the Republican candidate Rutherford B. Hayes literally stole the election away from the Democratic opponent Samuel J. Tilden after Tilden had soundly beaten him at the polls by almost a quarter million votes.

But contrary to what many people think, the keys to the White House are not necessarily given to the candidate who gathers the most votes at the polls. They are given to the man whom the electors from the electoral college give the most electoral votes. And it was this unique feature of our elective system which enabled Hayes to become the 19th President of the United States and ride into the White House by the slim margin of just one electoral vote.

A vote which Hayes gained at the expense of the Southern blacks.

The vote belonged to a batch of 22 contested electoral votes and Hayes gained this vote by making a deal with the Southern whites who controlled it. In exchange for the batch of contested votes, Hayes promised the Southern whites that he would end the federal government's control of the post-war South if he was elected president.

Hayes kept his promise and upon entering the White House one of the first things that he did was to terminate the federal government's Reconstruction Program in the South and to order the

troops. And with the federal troops gone and no longer around to provide them with protection, the blacks were systematically victimized and brutalized by their former slavemasters.

By day they were forced to work for little or nothing at all and by night they were intimidated by the terror of the Ku Klux Klan.

By far, it was the worst experience that the blacks had undergone since the end of the Civil War. Their lives, limbs, and property were in constant jeopardy.

So unlike the white pioneers who trekked West, the black pioneers departed against a background of terror and violence. And since the mass departures of the blacks was a loss of cheap labor for the South, the whites did everything that was within their power to keep the blacks from leaving. Bands of armed men blocked both the roads and river crossings.

"It looked like the South was ready to fight the war all over again," is the way one contemporary newspaper reporter described it.

And in one particular brutal incident, a mob of angry whites in the state of Mississippi seized one black pioneer who had returned from the state of Kansas to pick up his wife and cut off both of his hands and then told him, "Now go back to Kansas and work!"

But in spite of these adverse conditions, a steady stream of blacks continued to leave the South and settle down in the West. And in many instances, their first homes on the plains or prairie land were crude sod houses or dug-out homes half dug into the side of a protective hill. Homes of this kind were typical for the early pioneers, for there were no ready made homes to greet them. Almost always, they were greeted by an empty piece of free government

Black Pioneers

And the towns that did exist, were very few and far between. But this scarcity of towns was not all bad. Since the undeveloped state of the land created the opportunity for the black pioneers to build all-black towns of their own. And it is worth mentioning, that this same opportunity did not exist for the blacks who migrated to the already built big cities of the North.

The all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, was founded in 1877 by the first wave of Southern blacks who migrated to Kansas following the election of President Hayes in 1876. Almost one hundred years after it was founded, the town of Nicodemus is still in existence today.

Of all the Western states, black settlers from the South built more all-black towns in the state of Oklahoma than they did in any other. From

Head of the

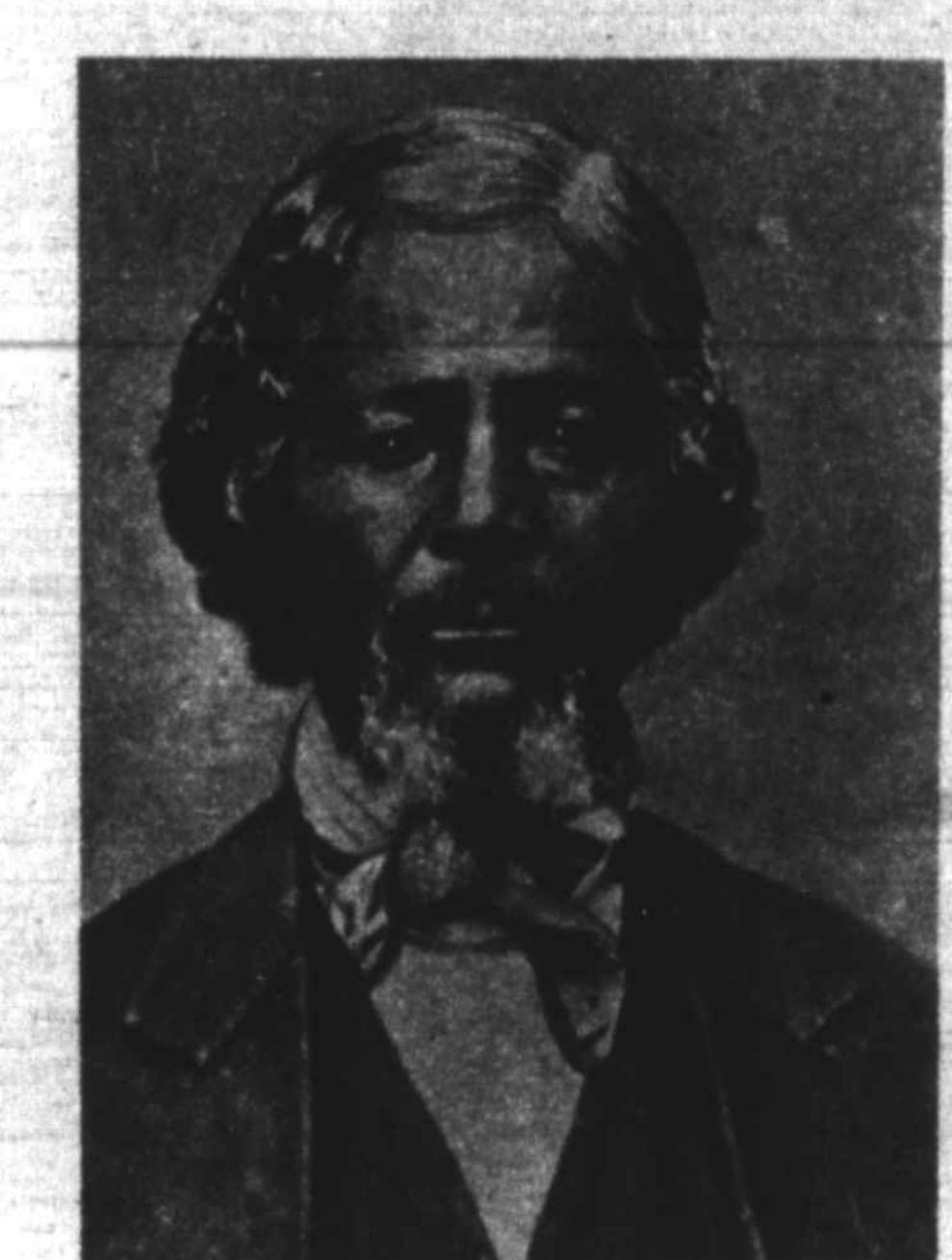
Bourbon Family. 1890 to 1910, twenty-five allblack towns sprang up in the state of Oklahoma.

Boley, Oklahoma, was one of these towns.

And like the town of Nicodemus, Kansas, the town of Boley, Oklahoma, is still in existence today. Boley was founded in 1903 and its immediate claim to fame was the boast that it had the tallest building of any town between Okmulgee and Oklahoma City.

But first and foremost, these all-black towns proved something.

America beyond the shadow of a doubt that black men were capable of establishing an all-black town and running it all by themselves. At this particular time, there were many whites who seriously doubted that the black man possessed the ability to do this. And there is a story to the effect that



EDWIN P. MCCABE

this is why the town of Boley, Oklahoma, came into existence.

To prove to the doubting whites that the black man was capable of self-government.

The success of the allblack frontier towns makes it immediately apparent that the black pioneers were guided by men who possessed the ability for able leadership. And this assumption is quite correct. They were visionary men who possessed unusual grit and determination.

It was the gritty kind of dogged determination that was common to all pioneer leaders, regardless of whether they were black or white

It was the gritty determination of the pioneer spirit.

And two leaders of the black pioneers who possessed this noble characteristic to its fullest degree were Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton and Edwin P. McCabe. Singleton and McCabe guided the destiny of thousands of black migrants to the Old West and no honest account of America's pioneer movement would be complete without mentioning their names.

Singleton was instrumental in the mass exodus of Southern blacks to the state of Kansas and he testified

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"Reaching breezes, Captain and three-man crew, and we made it through the Bermuda Triangle. What more could you ask for?"

"Old Grand-Dad?"



Old Grand-Dad.
When you ask a lot more from life.

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