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Nicodemus: Post-Reconstruction Politics and Racial Justice in Western Kansas

by Charlotte Hinger

(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. xv + 264 pp.
Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

Much has been written about Nicodemus, started in 1877, the only successful African-American settlement on the Great Plains of Kansas to survive. Nicodemus was settled mostly by freed slaves from the South after the end of Reconstruction, 1865-1877, when racism and discrimination in the South threatened the economic, social, cultural, and even physical lives of the former slaves. It was a time when migration from the South was seen by many African-Americans as the best hope of survival and, they also hoped, for economic success, civil rights, and social justice. Western Kansas offered homesteads and land was the main attraction. Unfortunately a lot of deceptive advertising induced settlers to come, expecting to arrive at a town and civilization but finding nothing but empty land along the South Solomon River.

The struggle for survival dominated the early years of Nicodemus, and some migrants did not stay. One former slave who came to Kansas from Mississippi reportedly said he would rather live in a Mississippi prison than in Kansas. Those who stayed, inspired by hope and devoted to hard work, managed to build farms as well as a town, helped organize Graham County, and were on the road to prosperity by the mid-1880s, despite continued hardships, discrimination, racism, and injustice. Nicodemus never got a railroad, and when the Union Pacific established the town of Bogue a few miles away in 1888, many businesses and residents left Nicodemus for the new town. But Nicodemus refused to die and survived to the present.

Charlotte Hinger looks at the leadership of the Nicodemus community during the founding years, focusing on "three men who were most instrumental in shaping the future of Nicodemus"—Abram Thompson Hall, Jr., Edward Preston McCabe, and John W. Niles. Of these three, only Niles was a former slave and from the South. None was married when he came to Nicodemus. Each contributed in a different way, although Hall and McCabe were business partners and shared many of the same ideas regarding education, economic development, social justice, and civil rights. All three left Nicodemus in the 1880s.

Hall and McCabe opened a business to help settlers locate land and file the proper papers to secure it. Hall served as deputy district clerk and McCabe was a notary public. Their services were essential to the early settlers. Niles led relief efforts to help the settlers survive during the first years in Kansas. Each of these men held different ideas about the best way to achieve equality and justice, although they all agreed on the importance of education, civil rights, and economic development.

Hall thought economic development and individual achievement were the most important factors because poor people did not receive the respect society extended to those with wealth and property. McCabe promoted legislation as the key to equal justice. Both McCabe and Hall were active in the Kansas Republican Party. Niles promoted reparations to former slaves as the way out of poverty and petitioned the U.S. Congress for reparations in 1883, without success. He came to believe that

social justice for African-Americans was not possible in the United States and supported separatism and emigration to another country. He did not return to Kansas.

Hinger explains in detail how the Nicodemus people led the organization of Graham County, and how they were the key to that organization. Hall left Kansas during the organization. McCabe was appointed temporary county clerk during the organization and was elected county clerk in 1881. In 1882 McCabe was elected state auditor, the first African-American to hold state office in Kansas. He was elected to a second term in 1884. He did not return to Nicodemus.

The research for this informative volume is extensive, including government documents, newspapers, correspondence, family histories, and many published articles and books. The organization and writing are finely crafted. Hinger traces the development of race relations in Kansas and the nation, and she shows how Nicodemus fit into the larger picture. Nicodemus was important. This book deserves a wide audience.