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AFRICAN AMERICANS
AND THE GREAT PLAINS
AN INTRODUCTION

During 23-25 February 1995 the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln sponsored its nineteenth annual interdisciplinary symposium, “African Americans and the Great Plains.” The conference, attended by more than 300 people from throughout the United States and Canada, sought to highlight African Americans’ role in Great Plains culture by looking at their contributions in various areas such as agriculture, anthropology, archeology, art, biology, dance, education, history, literature, medicine, music, photography, religion, sports, theater, and urban studies.

The four papers in this issue of the Great Plains Quarterly were selected to illuminate the diversity of roles African Americans have assumed over the years. Equally important, these papers illustrate the contributions African Americans made to the Great Plains.

Ronald Walters’s article, “The Great Plains Sit-In Movement, 1958-60,” explores and analyzes the organizational and personal networks of the sit-ins in Wichita, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Walters argues that the first sit-ins began on 12 July 1958, in Wichita, Kansas, spread to Oklahoma City (on 19 August 1958), and to other cities within a 100-mile radius through established organizations and personal networks of the NAACP Youth Council. Walters further argues that the majority of these sit-ins were rationally planned and led by established leaders, connected rather than isolated, led by the NAACP Youth Council, and supported by local resources. Finally, Walters concludes that the Wichita and Oklahoma City sit-ins triggered the Greensboro sit-ins and subsequent sit-ins in Southern towns and urban Northern communities.

In “Prelude to Brownsville: The Twenty-Fifth Infantry at Fort Niobrara, Nebraska, 1902-06,” Thomas R. Buecker describes the Twenty-fifth Infantry and race-relations between the black soldiers and local townspeople. The Twenty-fifth Infantry, organized in 1866 as one of the regular army cavalry and infantry regiments comprised of black enlisted men, served in Texas until it was transferred to the Department of Dakota in 1880. During the Spanish-American War, the infantry participated in the invasion of Cuba and served overseas in the Philippine Insurrection. In 1902 the regiment was returned to
the United States as part of the regular rotation of overseas units.

The author notes that the experiences of the Twenty-fifth Infantry at Fort Niobrara and the nearby town of Valentine stand in stark contrast to their experiences in Brownsville, Texas. In Valentine, the Twenty-fifth Infantry was an accepted and valued segment of the community, treated with respect. Their presence was largely appreciated by the local white population. In Texas, the black infantrymen were subjected to Jim Crow laws and hostile attitudes by the white citizenry. The racial atmosphere in Valentine and Brownsville differed for several reasons. Most important were fear and economics. The people of Valentine saw the soldiers at Fort Niobrara as their protectors against the Lakotas on the nearby Rosebud Reservation and the fort as an important local market.

"Frompin' in the Great Plains: Listening and Dancing to the Jazz Orchestras of Alphonso Trent, 1925-44," by Marc Rice, focuses on one of the most popular and influential territorial band leaders of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, Alphonso Trent. From 1925 to the mid 1940s, the Trent Orchestras were acknowledged by listeners and other musicians alike as among of the best jazz bands in the Southwest and Great Plains. In the cities and towns where they played, their performances were viewed as special events and played important social roles in the various communities, but particularly in the African American communities.

Most of the orchestras' engagements were held at extravagant and exclusively white hotels. These hotels, catering to the white economic elite, could offer the band steady, long-term employment. During the off nights, however, the Trent orchestras booked gigs in African American establishments. The Trent orchestras, like other African American bands of various sizes, had their best years just prior to the Great Depression but were devastated by the 1930s and subsequently disbanded. The Midwest jazz style did not die with the demise of the early bands, however, for the careers of the Count Basie Orchestra and Charlie Parker were their legacy.

In her study "With One Mighty Pull: Interracial Town Boosting in Frontier Nicodemus, Kansas," Claire M. O'Brien looks at the history of the last half of the 1880s in Nicodemus, Kansas. The story of Nicodemus is overwhelmingly an American story about cooperation, race relations, how hardships were overcome, political and economic justice, and the lasting contributions made by black and white Americans.

The story of Nicodemus's boom period is valuable not because it tells us about Nicodemus but because it shows that cooperative race relations, not based on the assumption of white supremacy, were a possibility in the nineteenth century. It also tells the story of how former slaves from Kentucky endured severe hardships on the inhospitable plains of western Kansas and how ordinary white Kansas settlers found equality and common cause with their African American counterparts and made different choices about the racial issues of the day than other groups.

These four articles only begin to suggest the scope of papers presented at the symposium and other research on African Americans' presence on the Great Plains. We hope these articles serve as a valuable introduction to readers unfamiliar with the roles and contributions of African Americans to Plains culture, and as a new and significant source of information for individuals knowledgeable in the field of African American/Black Studies.

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