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## "WITH ONE MIGHTY PULL" INTERRACIAL TOWN BOOSTING IN NICODEMUS, KANSAS

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## “WITH ONE MIGHTY PULL”

### INTERRACIAL TOWN BOOSTING IN NICODEMUS, KANSAS

CLAIRE O'BRIEN

One steamy July day in 1887, a young American of African descent named H. R. Cayton arrived in the little northwestern Kansas town of Nicodemus in Graham County. He had traveled from Wyandotte to try his luck in the real estate and loan business, for he had heard that Nicodemus, a town founded by former slaves a decade earlier, was the place to be for an ambitious young black man like himself. Cayton's arrival was enthusiastically noted by one of the town's two newspapers, the *Western Cyclone*: "Mr. C. is a promising young man and has got 'git up and git' to him and will undoubtedly make his mark," editor George

Sanford predicted confidently.<sup>1</sup> While the newspapers welcomed practically everyone who moved to, or visited, Nicodemus, the leaders of the town were particularly delighted with those new arrivals such as Cayton who brought some money to invest, for they were in the midst of boosting Nicodemus and needed every bit of capital they could get.

In mid-August, Cayton went thirty miles east to Stockton to buy some hogs. Many of the farmers of Nicodemus finally had the money to invest in additional livestock, and now seemed the ideal time to make an honest profit. Times were getting better for everyone in Nicodemus; in fact, the town was certain to boom by November, for, everyone believed, the railroad was coming!

Things did not go as smoothly in Stockton as Cayton had planned, however, for while he was vigorously arguing the price of hogs, he met a newspaper editor from neighboring Rooks County named W. L. Chambers, with whom he had had unpleasant dealings in the past. Evidently the two exchanged words, and Chambers, who was white, tried unsuccessfully to convince the hog dealers not to do business with Cayton.<sup>2</sup> Cayton bought his hogs

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and went home, but the incident galled him. The next week, he was infuriated by a racist editorial printed by Chambers in the *Rooks County Record*, which described a fist fight that had taken place during Nicodemus's annual Emancipation Day celebration.<sup>3</sup> Cayton's behavior in Stockton figured prominently in Chamber's complaints.

Cayton went to the offices of both Nicodemus newspapers and asked the editors to print his reply. There was no love lost between the residents of Graham County and Rooks County, and both Sanford and Hugh Lightfoot, editor of the *Nicodemus Enterprise*, were glad to oblige. Cayton's irritation took on a distinctly sarcastic tone as he responded to Chambers's:

minute description of my hair, race, and color, for which I return many thanks, for it doubtless sets to rest the many disputes as to what race I did belong to. Thank-you, sir, for your information . . . the *Record* tells us that I played the "smart aleck" buying hogs in Stockton . . . the deep-seated prejudices of this miserable puke would not by any means allow him to utter one word of praise for a negro . . . Sir, if I had appeared on the streets of Stockton as a hotel porter, a bootblack, or as monkey for the amusement of the general public he would not have seen any of the characteristic traits in me of a "smart aleck" but would have been [sic]—"he's a good nigger"—but [my] being in a good business avocation was quite too much for him . . . it is quite time you were going into your hole and pulling it in after you, and the next time you answer an article, answer the things contained therein, and not branch off into politics to gain sympathy. If you have not the ability to answer, keep quiet and don't make such a complete ass of yourself again.<sup>4</sup>

This letter is an indication that something remarkable happened in the town of Nicodemus, Kansas, during the last half of the 1880s. The letter needs to be placed within a

national social context if we are to understand just how unusual Nicodemus was during this period. The very significant legal and social gains so painstakingly made throughout the South during Reconstruction had been destroyed by the removal of federal troops from the former Confederacy in 1877, leaving most African Americans to the mercies of their former owners. Millions of Southern blacks feared that a return to slavery was a real possibility, for the whites of the South had brutally stripped them of the unreliable but nevertheless crucial protection they had enjoyed under Northern supervision. Most had been forcibly returned to virtual servitude, and hundreds had been murdered. At least 45,000 had migrated West, and most of these had gone to Oklahoma or Kansas.<sup>5</sup>

But the South was not the only place where African Americans faced danger from white attacks. Increased white hostility and violence were national phenomena that occurred in the East and Midwest as well as in the developing West.<sup>6</sup> It is this national picture, then, that lends Cayton's letter its particular significance. A shrewd young African-American businessman believed that he could safely call a white neighbor a "miserable puke" in print. His self-confidence illustrates a Nicodemus phenomenon that is the main focus of this paper: there was a completely interracial town elite throughout the last half of the 1880s, and it served, through sheer numbers and money, as a temporary buffer enabling about five hundred African Americans to maneuver in relative safety around the eastern part of Graham County, Kansas. This interracial town elite accomplished something rather extraordinary on the Kansas frontier during this brief period. In the midst of a national surge of violent racism, these men came to regard themselves quite self consciously as a group defined by very specific interests that, to a large extent, transcended the racial differences between its members.

The group's black and white members, acting swiftly and cooperatively to strengthen their shared interests, came to hold one another in a

genuine regard. There is, in fact, evidence that some of them became friends. Thus, while in the end Nicodemus had little enduring impact on county politics, something remarkable, although temporary, did develop within the town itself. And while this phenomenon did not stop the racist expressions that grew and flourished in Graham County right along with the town, it did make a significant difference both in the ways that the African-Americans of Nicodemus responded to those expressions, and in the ways in which the black and white members of the town's leadership came to view one another. Most important for observers from the late twentieth century, the example of Nicodemus shows that a cooperative and egalitarian model of race relations did exist in the late nineteenth century.

This paper describes the development of these social relations by examining the activities of the town's leaders from the end of 1886 through early September of 1888, when the business elite was the most organized and active. During this period, Nicodemus had its best chance of getting a railroad and the leaders were determined to convince either the Central Pacific, the Missouri Pacific, or the Santa Fe to come to their town. The story of their failure to do so has been aptly told by others. This paper treats the railroad struggle only peripherally then, and focuses on the crucial social relationships of the participants.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF NICODEMUS

In the fall of 1886 the people of Nicodemus were proud of their town. They had good reason to be. Most of them were former slaves from Kentucky who had endured severe hardship on the inhospitable plains of western Kansas, slowly building their community into the largest town in Graham County. Located 240 miles west of Topeka, approximately 120 miles from Colorado, and 50 miles south of the Nebraska border, Graham County lies west of the 100th meridian in the arid, treeless High Plains of western Kansas. Nicodemus is less than a mile from the county's eastern

border, located at the south fork of the Solomon River.

The town was incorporated in 1877, the result of a cooperative effort between W. R. Hill, an experienced white townsite developer from Indiana, and six African-American men who had travelled to Topeka from the South in search of cheap, unclaimed, federally owned land. These were W. H. Smith, representing a group of prospective colonists from Clarksville, Tennessee, who acted as president of the newly-formed Nicodemus Town Company, S. P. Roundtree, a minister from Kentucky chosen as secretary, Benjamin Carr, Jerry Allsap, Jeff Lenze, and William Edmonds, also all from Kentucky. Hill, treasurer of the town company, was to combine his considerable business expertise with Smith's and Roundtree's contacts throughout the South and within Topeka's growing African-American community. The group was soon joined by Z.T. Fletcher, corresponding secretary, who was to become one of Nicodemus's most influential citizens. Promoting their townsite via printed circulars and speaking tours of black churches, the organizers brought the first group of thirty colonists, all originally from Kentucky, to Nicodemus from Topeka in July of 1877. That fall they were joined by approximately 300 former slaves from Lexington, Kentucky, and in the spring of 1878, 200 reinforcements arrived from Georgetown, Kentucky. Seventy-five Mississippi freedmen arrived in two groups during the spring of 1879.<sup>8</sup>

Not all of these immigrants remained in Graham County, but by 1880, the black population stood at 484, with 452 of these residing within the Nicodemus township. While only 58 white settlers lived in the township proper, 3774 whites inhabited Graham County, making the African-Americans only 12 percent of the population.<sup>9</sup>

The earliest years of the settlement were marked by extreme poverty, lack of adequate farming equipment and timber, drought, prairie fires, crop failure, grasshopper swarms, and significant although not universal animosity from neighboring whites.<sup>10</sup> But by 1881

## MEMBERSHIP IN NICODEMUS ASSOCIATIONS

## Nicodemus Emigration Association, 1887

- \* *Lightfoot* – President
- Patterson** – Secretary
- Clayton* – Correspondence Secretary
- \* **Hawkins** – Associate Secretary
- \* **Garland** – Treasurer

## Nicodemus Land Company, 1887

- \* **Garland** – President
- Young* – Vice-President
- \* *Cotton* – Secretary
- \* *Lightfoot* – Correspondence Secretary
- \* **Williams** – Treasurer
- \* **Fletcher** – Locator
- Young* – Locator

## School District Officers, 1885

- \* **Fletcher** – Director
- \* *Wilson* – Treasurer
- Johnson** – Clerk

## Nicodemus Literary Society, 1886

- |                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| * <i>Cotton</i>   | <i>Hockins</i>     |
| * <b>Craig</b>    | * <i>Lightfoot</i> |
| * <b>Fletcher</b> | * <i>Newth</i>     |
| * <b>Garland</b>  | * <i>Stewart</i>   |
| * <b>Harper</b>   | <i>Washington</i>  |
| * <b>Hawkins</b>  | * <b>Williams</b>  |

## Nicodemus Cornet Band, 1887

- \* J. Lowery – leader

- |                         |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Barnett</i>          | * <b>Harper</b>    |
| * <i>Cotton</i>         | * <b>Hawkins</b>   |
| * <i>Duncan</i>         | * <b>Henrie</b>    |
| * <b>Fletcher</b>       | * <i>McPherson</i> |
| * <b>T. J. Fletcher</b> | <i>Ward</i>        |

## Nicodemus Baseball Club, 1887

- |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Barnsides</i>   | <i>Logan</i>       |
| * <b>Craig</b>     | * <i>McPherson</i> |
| * <i>Cotton</i>    | <b>Moreland</b>    |
| * <i>Duncan</i>    | <b>Patterson</b>   |
| * <b>Garland</b>   | * <i>Stewart</i>   |
| * <b>Hawkins</b>   | <i>Turner</i>      |
| <i>Hays</i>        | <i>VanDuvall</i>   |
| * <b>Henrie</b>    | <i>Watt</i>        |
| * <i>Lightfoot</i> |                    |

Landowners organized to give away town lots to anyone agreeing to improve (build on) them:

- |                         |                 |
|-------------------------|-----------------|
| * <b>Z. T. Fletcher</b> | * <i>Newth</i>  |
| * <b>Harper</b>         | * <i>Wilson</i> |
| * <b>Henrie</b>         | <i>Woodward</i> |
| * <i>McPherson</i>      |                 |

## Grand Benevolent Society of Nicodemus

- |                         |                  |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Atkinson</i>         | * <b>Hawkins</b> |
| * <b>T. J. Fletcher</b> | <i>Napue</i>     |
| * <b>Garland</b>        | <b>Weaver</b>    |
| * <b>Harper</b>         |                  |

## Daughters of Zion (officers)

- Burnside*
- Davenport*
- \* **Fletcher**

Nicodemus Joint Stock Company  
(25 members)

## Officers:

- Dorsey*
- Scott**
- Williamson**

Legend: \* = appearing more than once; **bold** = African American; *italics* = Euro-American; roman = unidentified.

settlers reported cultivating an average of twelve acres per homestead, for a total of nearly 1000 acres of corn, supplemented by small plots of millet and sorghum. By that year, Nicodemus also had three general stores, a post office, a drug store, a meat market, three hotels, two livery stables, three churches, a lumber yard, and a school. Although a good portion of the town's thirty-five structures were made of sod, soft limestone buildings were beginning to appear.<sup>11</sup>

#### UNITING TO ATTRACT A RAILROAD

This steady progress continued, so that by late 1886 the residents of Nicodemus were feeling confident. It finally looked as if the town had a bright future. There had been sufficient rainfall and good harvests for several years in a row, enabling local farmers to invest in livestock and farm implements, to improve their houses and barns, and to support the growing number of Nicodemus businesses. Although half of these were owned and operated by white men, the African-American town leaders were willing enough to work with these merchants, for they had the crucial investment capital necessary to boost the town. Nicodemus was beginning to look like a solid investment opportunity to these entrepreneurs, and it seemed like a good idea to stick around for awhile. While the African Americans, much more tied to the town than the whites and hoping to insure its permanent survival, were playing for significantly higher stakes, they were certainly also very interested in making as much money as possible. Getting a railroad interested in putting a line through Nicodemus would attract enough settlers to guarantee the town's success. It was only a matter of time, the businessmen reasoned, before the railroads would be competing to connect eastern Kansas with the Rocky Mountains, and Nicodemus, they felt, was in a particularly auspicious location.

In December of 1886, the community's dearest dream seemed about to come true. A

representative of the Missouri Pacific requested that Nicodemus absorb the costs of four miles of track, a standard arrangement between railroad companies and frontier towns. This request generated a flurry of debate and activity, and marked the real beginning of the genuine interracial cooperation that was to soon flourish within the community's leadership. The only two African Americans on the seven-member committee chosen to travel to Stockton to negotiate the railroad bonds with the Missouri Pacific were the well-known and influential Fletcher brothers. They owned a hotel and livery stable, ran the post office, sold insurance, and operated a land office business. Their economic power guaranteed them membership. More African Americans would become part of the leadership group later on as social relationships developed. The five whites on the committee were A. L. McPherson, a prominent banker; druggist C. H. Newth; S. G. Wilson, county treasurer and owner of a general store; R. E. Lewis, proprietor of a new store selling farm equipment; and newspaper owner and editor, H. K. Lightfoot.<sup>12</sup> All on the committee except Lewis were to play vital roles in the developing biracial leadership.

On 19 January 1887 a town meeting was held to discuss the bonds and to vote on whether or not to submit the question to the voters in a special election. Z. T. Fletcher chaired the meeting and a new man in town, a white lawyer named Cotton, served as secretary. One of those who spoke strongly in favor of the bonds was an African-American named Samuel Garland who, although not a newcomer, was the owner of a new Nicodemus stagecoach company. Cotton and Garland were soon both to join the leading group.<sup>13</sup>

During the last week of that January, on the same day that Lightfoot and Newth were in Stockton to confer again with Missouri Pacific officials, McPherson, Z. T. Fletcher, Wilson, and Coffin met back in Nicodemus. No one knows what they talked about, but we may be reasonably certain that it had something to do with the railroad.<sup>14</sup>

## BUSINESS AND SOCIABILITY

On the other hand they may have discussed baseball, for a team was organized that week. With Lightfoot as general manager and umpire and Samuel Garland as captain, the team was about half black and half white. H. S. Henrie, an African-American who had opened a successful drygoods store was elected president of the ball club, and H. C. Hawkins, the clerk of the district court, who was also a skilled shoemaker and had for some time owned and operated a barbershop, was its secretary. Hawkins was also of African descent. The influential white banker, McPherson, was just another ballplayer, as was lawyer Cotton. The team named itself, possibly at Lightfoot's suggestion, The Western Cyclone Baseball Club, and enthusiastically embarked on a vigorous, if unsuccessful, career.<sup>15</sup>

A week later, the Graham County commissioners scheduled the special railroad bond election to be held on 22 March 1887. Two new businesses opened in Nicodemus that week; a drugstore and a blacksmith shop. Most significantly, Lightfoot and Hawkins went into business together. "Law, Land, Loan, and Investment Agents—Speculating and Investment in Real Estate for Eastern Capitalists," read their advertisement in the *Western Cyclone*.<sup>16</sup>

Less than a week after he became Lightfoot's partner, Hawkins was physically attacked in Millbrook, which had just won the county seat after a particularly nasty struggle. Although the county seat fight was evidently commonly understood to be the reason for the attack, it was also understood that racism was a factor. Lightfoot reported the incident with unusual restraint. He may have made a political decision to downplay the incident and to focus on promoting the town, for his 10 February editorial proclaimed

Nicodemus is booming more than any town in Graham County and will continue to do so for [some] time to come. No rival town to annoy us, no county seat strife to agitate

the minds of our people, and the brightest of prospects for two or more railroads in the next twelve months . . . Surely Nicodemus has reason for a big boom.<sup>17</sup>

As March drew to a close, seven Nicodemus businessmen who held fifty town lots in common decided to offer them free to anyone who would improve them. The African-Americans in the group were Z. T. Fletcher, hotel owner and land agent, A. N. Harper, postmaster, and H. S. Henrie, drygoods merchant. White members were A. L. McPherson, owner of the bank of Nicodemus, C. H. Newth, doctor and druggist, and S. G. Wilson, county treasurer and proprietor of a general store. The seventh member, A. Woodward, could not be more fully identified. Here we are presented with the rather remarkable picture of a completely biracial business elite offering free land to anyone of either race with the resources to erect a building of some kind on it. Evidently, a small house would do; although naturally the hope was to draw more businessmen, what was wanted in Nicodemus was *people* to help build up the town, and apparently neither the whites nor the blacks cared a great deal what color they were. They cared more about how much money they had. But poor men who were willing to work hard, and to point their efforts in the direction the town leaders thought they should be pointed, were also welcome in Nicodemus, although perhaps with a little less enthusiasm. Interestingly, the same issue of the *Western Cyclone* that first printed this ongoing offer of free land contained Lightfoot's opinion about the attack on his business partner in Millbrook a month earlier. Although he understood the political fallout left over from the county seat fight, he did not for a minute attribute the fist Hawkins got in his face to inter-county antagonisms. "I charge Millbrook with drawing the color line," he declared. In a vehement defense of his friend, he charged the town leaders of Millbrook with conspiracy.<sup>18</sup>

It is not clear why Lightfoot waited a full month before responding to the attack. He

was anything but shy with his opinions and appears to have been unafraid of reprisal. Probably he simply found it prudent to wait, but it is also possible that he took a public stand in response to an event that had just taken place in Nicodemus. Lightfoot had been showing a correspondent from the *Atchison Champion* around town and had called together a small, select, completely interracial gathering of Nicodemus's leaders at his home to meet his fellow journalists. McPherson was there with his two daughters, Birdie and Gracie, who performed a musical piece with Henrie's daughter, Jennie, there with her parents. The Fletcher brothers were also present. This was no business meeting, and it was much more than a group of town boosters thrown together by circumstance, and glued together by pragmatism, although it was also that. Certainly that is all that it had started out to be. But these people had become friends. They wanted to spend time together, and they sought each other out to make that happen.<sup>19</sup>

The bond election was held as scheduled on 22 March, and the town leaders were extremely gratified by the results. By an overwhelming majority, Nicodemus committed itself to giving the Missouri Pacific \$16,000. The railroad told the town that the line would be completed by 1 December 1887.

#### PREPARING FOR THE BOOM

The *Western Cyclone* was ecstatic: "Boom! Boom!! Boom!!! Boom!!!! Boom!!!!!" ran its headline.

Last Tuesday was a day long to be remembered in Nicodemus: for that day the people decided by an overwhelming majority that we would be a crossroads post office no longer, but that ere another year should pass, that we should develop into a town . . . the boom is on. Not a mere blow, but a boom that will roll on indefinitely.<sup>20</sup>

The *Western Cyclone* had good reason to gloat a little. The deeded lands of Nicodemus

township had recently been assessed at \$25,000, excluding the city lots, and during the previous four days fifty-six people had visited the town. "Nicodemus is the most harmonious place on earth," the newspaper congratulated its readers, "Everybody works for the interests of the town and all pull together with one mighty pull. What is there to prevent us from having the best town in the country, even though other towns do envy us?"<sup>21</sup>

A week after the election, the boom in land sales had already begun. Land notices in the *Western Cyclone* tripled, and the paper reported an influx of visitors investigating business and investment opportunities in the town. Lightfoot added a little sermon on civic duty. "The only men who are of worth to a town or community," he lectured, "are those who can forget their own selfish ends long enough and who are liberal enough in their ideas to encourage every project that is calculated to build up the town."<sup>22</sup>

In the last week of April, the *Western Cyclone* began a short series narrating the history of Nicodemus to commemorate the town's tenth anniversary. The small group of community leaders, who had not known one another for very long, felt the need to claim some kind of a common history. Attempting to fashion a shared past and formalizing its presentation helped the Nicodemus business elite develop a group identity. The history that Lightfoot wrote was remarkable because the settlement and earliest years of the town, when Nicodemus had been all African-American, had become in a symbolic sense the history of the white leaders of the town as well. The editor noted carefully the names of the first settlers, the first sod house built, the first business opened, sermon preached, church constructed, and sod dugout school established. As Lightfoot preserved for posterity the names of African Americans like minister Simon Roundtree, schoolteacher Mrs. Z. T. Fletcher, blacksmith John Lee, and hotel owner Anderson Boles, he also created a kind of shared history between blacks and whites by claiming the African American legacy on behalf of both



groups. For example, late nineteenth-century white people simply did not commemorate the birth of an African-American child as the first person born in "their" town but noted the birth of the first white child. In Nicodemus during the 1880s, an African-American boy named Henry Williams represented everyone's child because, in a wonderful, nearly unconscious, and brief reversal, African-American history had become everyone's history.<sup>23</sup>

In early May it seemed to everyone that proof of Nicodemus's solid future had arrived, for the Missouri Pacific Railroad surveyors arrived and actually began surveying. More people began moving into town, a new restaurant opened up, and banker McPherson spearheaded a tree-planting campaign. Buildings were erected; the new stone A.M.E. church was completed and the people of the town passed a \$1500 bond to build a new school building with two stories and four rooms.<sup>24</sup>

In mid-May of 1887 Lightfoot sold the *Western Cyclone* to W. R. Hill, the white land speculator who had helped to found Nicodemus, but who lived in neighboring Hill City. Lightfoot's reasons for selling his newspaper remain unclear. He may have left town briefly, but he could not have gone very far, as he was soon back in the thick of things in Nicodemus. Meanwhile, Hill hired a fellow Hill City resident, George Sanford, as editor of the *Western Cyclone*. Toward the end of May, Sanford summed up the situation for anyone in Nicodemus who still had any doubts: "The Boom has commenced in earnest! We can almost hear the cars whistle!"<sup>25</sup>

One of Nicodemus's most enthusiastic visitors that May was a young lawyer and newspaper reporter of African descent, who worked as a traveling correspondent for a black Memphis newspaper called the *Memphis Watchman*. Although much of what he wrote about Nicodemus must be understood as fairly standard town-booming journalism, the strength of his genuine personal response to the town is unmistakable. Lightfoot had taken this reporter around in the same way he had the earlier Atchison reporter, and the man from

Memphis was delighted at the success of the African-American farmers he met. Things were not like this in Tennessee. Perhaps the spectre of violent and determined racism, closing in inexorably to seal off the future for black people all over America, made his experience in Nicodemus doubly meaningful to him. "I was introduced, I suppose, to nearly a hundred colored citizens who owned their own farms," he wrote to his editor in Memphis, "estimating their worth from \$5,000 down to \$1,000." The young reporter mentioned each leading citizen by name and race, and praised their various accomplishments with a genuine, if extravagant, regard. He spoke at the Baptist Church, and was driven to Millbrook by Z. T. Fletcher where, to his astonishment, he was hired to represent a white man in an important legal case. He remarked upon the racial harmony of Nicodemus so consistently, and with such wonder, that it is clear that he moved past his town-boosting duties to tell his people back in Memphis something about the town that he obviously knew to be rare.<sup>26</sup>

#### THE SUMMER OF 1887

The town experienced steady growth throughout the summer of 1887. The influx of people continued; although much of it consisted of travelers on their way farther west, this traffic poured cash into Nicodemus's businesses. H. S. Henrie and A. N. Harper both completed large stone store buildings, and a new blacksmith shop opened up. The *Western Cyclone*'s editor kept up a sort of ongoing lecture on civic duty: "There is no occasion for any further question with reference to any public enterprise than the question as to whether it promises well for Nicodemus," Sanford asserted severely on June 10th, "It is a narrow and unfruitful view that leads one to first inquire as to whether the proposition is not more in the interests of one man than another, more in the interests of someone else than oneself."<sup>27</sup>

Although the town leaders were increasingly concerned that the Missouri Pacific was

not making the expected progress, the community soon had a respite from railroad worries. The Fourth of July was approaching, and Nicodemus was a town that dearly loved to celebrate. On the big day, the interracial Nicodemus Cornet Band, which had been organized that spring and had been practicing regularly, played a rousing selection to an enthusiastic crowd, many of whom were farm families of both races who had travelled to the festivities from miles around. The Western Cyclone Baseball Club played against Webster and lost. There were speeches in the afternoon and a big fireworks display in the evening. Some of the leading citizens were kept extremely busy changing their clothes that day. For example, after A. L. McPherson, H. S. Henrie, H. C. Hawkins, and W. Cotton played baseball, they had to change into their band uniforms. After the band performed, they had to put on their good suits, because they were all giving speeches. Garland and Lightfoot didn't have to rush after the ball game was over because they weren't in the band, but they did have to put their good suits on after the picnic lunch because they were giving speeches, too.<sup>28</sup>

Both the order and the content of the speeches were extremely significant. The program was structured so that no two members of either race would speak in a row, producing a racial balance not just in the number of speakers, but in the order in which they spoke. It was an exact pattern: Cotton (white), Garland (black), McPherson (white), Hawkins (black), Newth (white), Samuels (black), Lightfoot (white) and Henrie (black). The titles of the speeches reveal a late nineteenth-century Fourth of July fare that is revealing precisely because it was so perfectly standard. The topics are in indication of how essentially conservative the entire leading group was and the extent to which the members of African descent identified, at least publicly, with the dominant culture, if only for pragmatic reasons. No speeches about racial injustice were heard in Nicodemus that day, although everyone in the crowd was probably aware of the

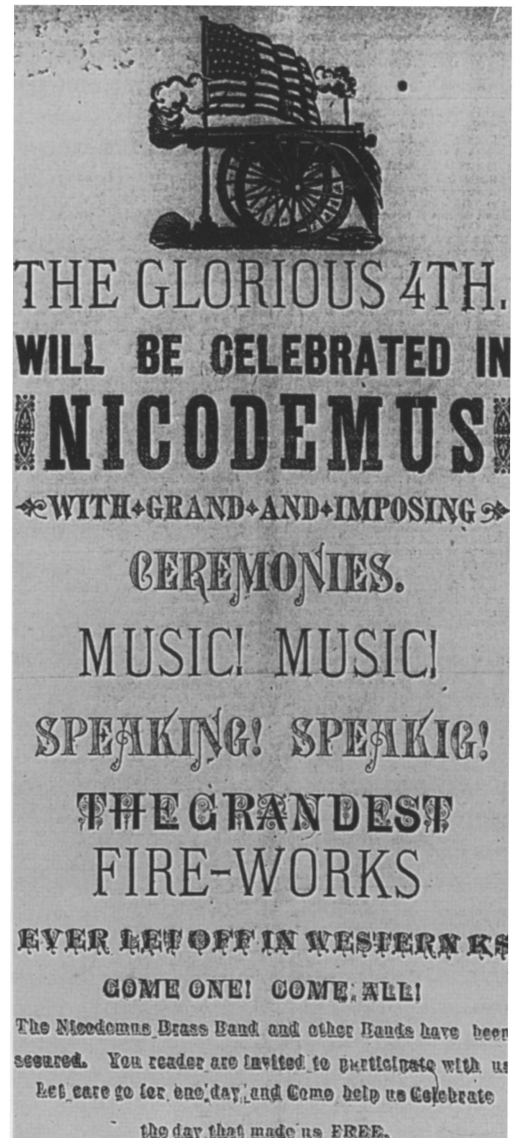


FIG. 1. *Fourth of July ad, (Nicodemus) Western Cyclone, 24 June 1887, p. 3.* Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka.

rising dangers of a powerful and violent national racist impulse. There was no talk of immigrating to Liberia, although some there had friends or relatives who had gone within the past few years. These hopeful black entrepreneurs considered themselves Americans

with their interests tied to those of their fellow Americans. They had no time for bitterness, and, as was so often the case amongst African Americans of the Post-Reconstruction era, they avoided recrimination, eager to embrace a spirit of cooperation and reconciliation. In spite of the forces they knew to be moving against them, the African American leaders of Nicodemus and their white friends had a town to build, a new generation to raise, and a profound faith in the future.

Cotton began the program by speaking on "The Past of Kansas," followed by Garland, whose topic was "The Future of Kansas." McPherson lectured the crowd on "America," Hawkins spoke about "The Stars and Stripes," Newth (an English immigrant) wanted his neighbors to know about "Our Pilgrim Fathers," while Samuels instructed them on "Our Duty." Lightfoot spoke on the topic of "Nicodemus; its Past and Future" and Henrie ended the program by speaking, with an incongruous Victorian flourish, on "Mothers of America."<sup>29</sup>

Nicodemus's most beloved holiday was the annual Emancipation Day Celebration, held every 1 August to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the West Indies. It was attended, as usual, by both blacks and whites from miles around. Unfortunately, the 1887 festivities were marred by a fist fight. Although this had never happened before, and the belligerents were visitors, in town for the day, some of Nicodemus's neighbors seized the opportunity to condemn the town, evidently with some clearly racist language. Lightfoot, by this time editor of the new *Nicodemus Enterprise*, leaped into the fray. Why were towns like Millbrook, Wildhorse, and Webster "howling" about one fist fight in Nicodemus, he wanted to know, when all of them had been the site of more frequent and serious violent episodes? Lightfoot provided a list of the worst cases to refresh the memory of any town that had forgotten its own recent bad behavior.

Lightfoot ended with an extraordinary statement that reveals how strong the group identity of the town leaders had become: "Because

our skin happens to be a little dark," he wrote defiantly, "we are condemned in the strongest terms for what two outside strangers do. But then, are not colored people able to have their differences the same as others? If anyone should think differently, they are certainly in error. A more peaceable set of people were never together than those who dwell in and around Nicodemus."<sup>30</sup>

This was remarkable language for a white man to use. Lightfoot had come to identify much more strongly with his African-American social peers than with whites from other towns. Although this attitude says something about him as a person, it is also an indicator of the general social climate in Nicodemus that year, a climate in which an attitude like Lightfoot's was allowed to flourish.

#### THE BOOM DEFLATES

By late August, with the railroad nowhere in sight, it was clear that the 1 December deadline promised by the Missouri Pacific would not be met. Uncertainty was in the air. *Western Cyclone* editor Sanford tried to reassure the town: "We will get the Santa Fe [Railroad] which will please us as well," he promised.<sup>31</sup> But September found the Missouri Pacific still hedging its bets; the Santa Fe, meanwhile, had not been heard from since the previous spring.

Morale in Nicodemus began to sink, and people started slowly trickling out. Most of the town's residents, however, were determined to stay. *Nicodemus Enterprise* editor Lightfoot gave vigorous encouragement to everyone except *Western Cyclone* editor George Sanford and Sanford's boss, W. R. Hill, both of whom lived in Hill City and had become Lightfoot's archenemies, although he had sold them the *Western Cyclone* only four months earlier. Lightfoot knew that Hill's interest in Nicodemus would last just as long as it took for Hill City to be named county seat. He had always felt, with some justification, that Hill exploited Nicodemus for his own political ends,<sup>32</sup> and Hill's continued presence in the town in the form of the *Western*

*Cyclone* infuriated Lightfoot. Hill and Sanford "have no interest in our town . . . [other than] their own economic gain," he sputtered as September drew to a close,

All their money goes to a rival town . . . how much longer are the citizens of Nicodemus going to submit to such Hill City predominance and tyranny and continue to be sapped of their extra few dimes, simply to gratify the needs of a few whimsical long-haired granified county seat cranks?<sup>33</sup>

Even when viewed as fairly standard small town nineteenth-century political rhetoric, there is nevertheless a genuine quality to Lightfoot's remarks. He cared about his town, and he cared about his African-American friends. In identifying with them, he placed himself solidly in opposition to the neighboring white elite and to one of the most powerful men in Graham County.

Just before Christmas of 1887, the *Enterprise* gave its last piece of heartfelt advice. "Stick out for your property in Nicodemus," Lightfoot begged his neighbors, "Do not sell to speculators but hold to it for your own special benefit. For just as sure as one season follows another, Nicodemus will be 'the town' of Graham County." This was the last issue of the *Nicodemus Enterprise*.<sup>34</sup> But although Lightfoot was ready to give up on the newspaper business, he was not ready to give up on Nicodemus. The following spring found him still in town, trying his luck as a lawyer. Although many whites, and some African-Americans, such as Henrie and Patterson, had left town, a number of Nicodemus's leaders remained. The leading local news story late that June, reported ahead of a story about graft in the county treasurer's office, and in much larger type, told his friends and neighbors that banker McPherson's sore foot was improving. They were all gratified to know that the foot would soon be as good as new. The cornet band still played in Nicodemus during that summer of 1888, the literary society discussed

great literature, and the baseball team continued to lose almost every game it played. There were evening croquet games and ice-cream socials on the banks of the Solomon River, sometimes lasting until dawn.<sup>35</sup> And both black and white men once again gave longwinded speeches that Fourth of July.

It still seemed reasonable to hope for a railroad. Although Missouri Pacific officials continued to hedge, they had not said no, and there were always the \$16,000 in bonds that the people of Nicodemus had raised the previous spring. Meanwhile, workers from the Central Branch of the Union Pacific were laying track as close as Logan and Fagan, on their way to Nicodemus's tiny neighbor Bogue, just six miles to the south. In September, Nicodemus's merchants began pouring into Bogue, often taking their buildings with them. *Nicodemus Cyclone* editor J. E. Porter urged them to stay: "For every one that goes now, we will get ten wide-awake men next spring. Don't get frightened, hold onto your property, and be ready to enjoy the real boom that will surely come."<sup>36</sup> Porter did not follow his own advice, but ceased publishing his newspaper with that issue, and moved to Bogue himself to open a drug store. How much longer Lightfoot and McPherson stayed is unclear. What is clear is that they were very reluctant to leave, even when it was clearly in their economic interest to do so. Months after many of the town's businessmen had departed for greener pastures, the relationships that had developed amongst the leadership continued to tie some of them to Nicodemus.

## CONCLUSION

It is difficult to determine how important this brief period in Nicodemus's history was to the town. While it is tempting to view the town's boom stage as pivotal because the unusual strength of its interracial relationships may appeal to us, it would be a mistake to look to this period for any lasting definition of Nicodemus. The story of Nicodemus is overwhelmingly an African-American story. The

real hardships were overcome and the lasting contributions made by African Americans. In fact, the town itself continues to be an African-American victory. Two and a half years of an active interracial presence, no matter how vigorous and cooperative, had little, if any, lasting impact on the development of the town. Much of the social infrastructure, including such influential church-based groups as the Daughters of Zion, or the important Grand Benevolent Society, had always been all black.

The story of Nicodemus's boom period is valuable not because it tells us much about Nicodemus but because it shows that cooperative race relations that were not based on an assumption of white supremacy were a possibility in the nineteenth century. Apologists for the racism of nineteenth-century whites cannot simply argue that these people were products of their time who could have made no other choices. The white leaders of Nicodemus who found common cause with their African-American counterparts were not abolitionists or self-conscious agitators for social justice. They were ordinary Kansas settlers. If these men made different choices about the racial issues of the day than other white Americans, then there were different choices to be made.

What makes a Hugh Lightfoot? Was the situation in Nicodemus so unusual that its white residents had choices that were not available elsewhere? Or did the heavy-handed racism that surrounded the town provide the white residents of Nicodemus with much the same kinds of choices as anyone else? Certainly, they were extremely self-conscious in the posture they took, which indicates that they understood themselves as having made a choice and taken a side. Or were mutual need and close proximity all that were required to produce a seedbed from which these egalitarian interracial relationships seemed naturally to grow? This seems doubtful, as nothing was natural about relationships between African Americans and whites two decades after the Civil War, and only a decade after the end of Reconstruction.

How then, may we explain these remarkable relationships? In this paper I have only been able to set them out. I have neglected women's roles and gender relations and the crucial role of domestic life in social affairs to focus on the public and thus more visible activities of Nicodemus's businessmen. Further investigation is certainly called for. Such a study would be particularly relevant, given the current rise of a powerful racist backlash that seeks to blame the corrosive effects of systemic white supremacy on its African-American targets while denying that nineteenth and twentieth century whites did have the intellectual capital to choose a path other than white supremacy.

#### NOTES

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1. *Western Cyclone*, 29 July 1877.
2. *Ibid.*, 26 August 1877.
3. *Rooks County Record*, 19 August 1877.
4. *Nicodemus Western Cyclone*, 26 August 1877, *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 24 August 1877.
5. Testimony given before the Voorhees United States Senate Select Committee, called in June of 1880 to investigate the Black Exodus of 1879, de-

tailed the horrifying extent of southern white violence, including mass murder, during this period. Witnesses also reported the wide-spread practice of "hiring out" African-American "convicts" for as little as a quarter of a cent a day to labor for white bidders. Frequent lynchings, whippings, maimings, and beatings were also described, as was the universal Southern practice of keeping African-American sharecroppers in perpetual debt to white planters, legally preventing blacks from leaving the plantations. See U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of Select Committee of U.S. Senate to Investigate the Causes of Removal of Negroes from Southern States, etc.*, 3 volumes, 46th Congress, 2nd session, Senate Report 693 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880). There is no agreement on the number of African-Americans who fled to Kansas and Oklahoma during this period. Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1977), the recognized authority on the Exodus of 1879, judges the number going to Kansas alone to be around 40,000. Taking the intervening decade, as well as those people who went to Oklahoma, into consideration, 45,000 seems a conservative estimate.

6. See Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979) for a description of some of the violence that occurred in Oklahoma as well as in Kansas.

7. Kenneth M. Hamilton carefully examines Nicodemus's railroad struggle in *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), an excellent comparative study of five black Western towns. Hamilton makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Nicodemus's development by showing that it followed the classic pattern of settlement, growth, boom, and decline common to most western towns that did not get a railroad. His emphasis on the primacy of profit as the moving force behind the town's development, however, obscures the crucial context of the desperate social position of Post-Reconstruction African Americans. This precarious position was a guarantee that black settlers had an investment in their towns that included, but went far beyond, entrepreneurship, and was ultimately characterized by the need for community survival, not big profits.

8. There is some discrepancy in the scholarship regarding the exact numbers of settlers in each group, their respective points of origin, and their arrival dates. However, all are agreed on the overwhelming majority being from Georgetown and Lexington, Kentucky and on this general chronology. See Orval McDaniel, "A History of Nicodemus, Graham County, Kansas," master's thesis, Fort Hays

State College, 1943, p. 42. See also Glenn Schwendemann, "Nicodemus: Negro Haven on the Solomon," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 34 (no. 1, spring 1963): 10-31. See also Hamilton, *Ibid.*, pp. 10-13.

9. United States Census Office, *Tenth Census, 1880*, for Kansas, Graham County.

10. William J. Belleau, "The Nicodemus Colony of Graham County, Kansas," master's thesis, Fort Hays State College, 1950, pp. 16-17. See also Schwendemann, "Nicodemus" (note 8 above), pp. 16-18; McDaniel "History of Nicodemus" (note 8 above), pp. 53-57, and Hamilton, *Black Towns* (note 7 above), pp. 11-15. George A. Root's "Biographical Sketch of Reverend Daniel Hickman," Graham County History Manuscript Collection, Kansas State Historical Society, provides an excellent oral history of the severe hardships endured by the early settlers.

11. Schwendemann, "Nicodemus" (note 8 above), pp. 24-26.

12. *Western Cyclone*, 20 January 1887.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.* (The paper had reported that the meeting was to take place. The next month the bond election was held.)

15. *Western Cyclone*, 27 January, 3 February 1887.

16. *Western Cyclone*, 3 February 1887.

17. *Western Cyclone*, 10 February 1887.

18. *Western Cyclone*, 17 March 1887.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Western Cyclone*, 24 March 1887.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Western Cyclone*, 31 March 1887.

23. *Western Cyclone*, 21 April 1887.

24. *Western Cyclone*, 5 May 1887.

25. *Western Cyclone*, 19 May 1887.

26. *Ibid.*, republication of *Watchman* article.

27. *Western Cyclone*, 10 June 1887.

28. *Western Cyclone*, 24 June 1887. The program of events planned for the Fourth of July was printed in this late June issue of the newspaper in order to advertise the celebration.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 17 August 1887. See *Rooks County Record* (note 3 above). See also Crockett, *Black Towns* (note 6 above).

31. *Western Cyclone*, 26 August 1887.

32. According to Crockett, in 1879 the *Graham County Leveler*, a Gettysburg, Kansas, newspaper, quoted Hill as saying, "We will have to make concessions to the niggers and give them a few little offices, but when we get the county seat at Hill City they may go to hell." *Black Towns* (note 6 above), p. 90.

33. *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 28 September 1887.

34. *Nicodemus Enterprise*, 23 December 1887.

35. *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 22 June 1888. This newspaper should not be confused with the *Western Cyclone*. It was established on 30 December 1887,

two weeks after the last issue of the *Western Cyclone* was published and a week after the end of the *Nicodemus Enterprise*, and edited by J. E. Porter.

36. *Nicodemus Cyclone*, 7 September 1888.