

AFRICAN AMERICAN PIONEERS



WRITTEN BY BRANDON VOGEL

ILLUSTRATED BY PAULA WALLACE

DEVELOPED BY JOEY K. VICKERY

PREFACE



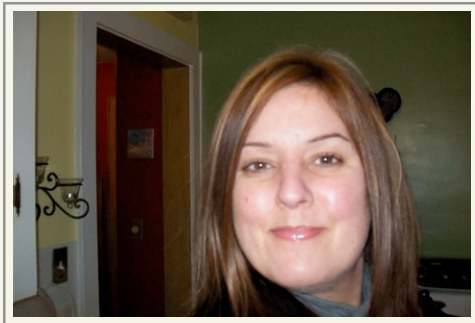
Come here, I want you to meet some people!



Brandon Vogel is a staff writer for Hail Varsity Magazine and website editor for HailVarsity.com. As a freelancer, he has written for FoxSports.com, MSN.com, CBSSports.com and others. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Emerson College in 2005.



Paula Wallace is a working artist with a studio at the Hot Shops Art Center In Omaha, Nebraska. Ms. Wallace is a graduate of the University of Iowa and continued her training in Ireland and Chicago. In addition to fine art, Paula has worked as an illustrator and muralist, curator and arts facilitator. She has been involved with liturgical and public art, interior design and art consultation.



Me! I am Joey Vickery. I am a teacher at Fontenelle Elementary in Omaha, Nebraska. I have the honor and pleasure of spending my days teaching and learning from amazing fourth grade students. I have a B.A. from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, a B.S. from Peru State College and a masters in U.S. History from Nebraska Wesleyan University.

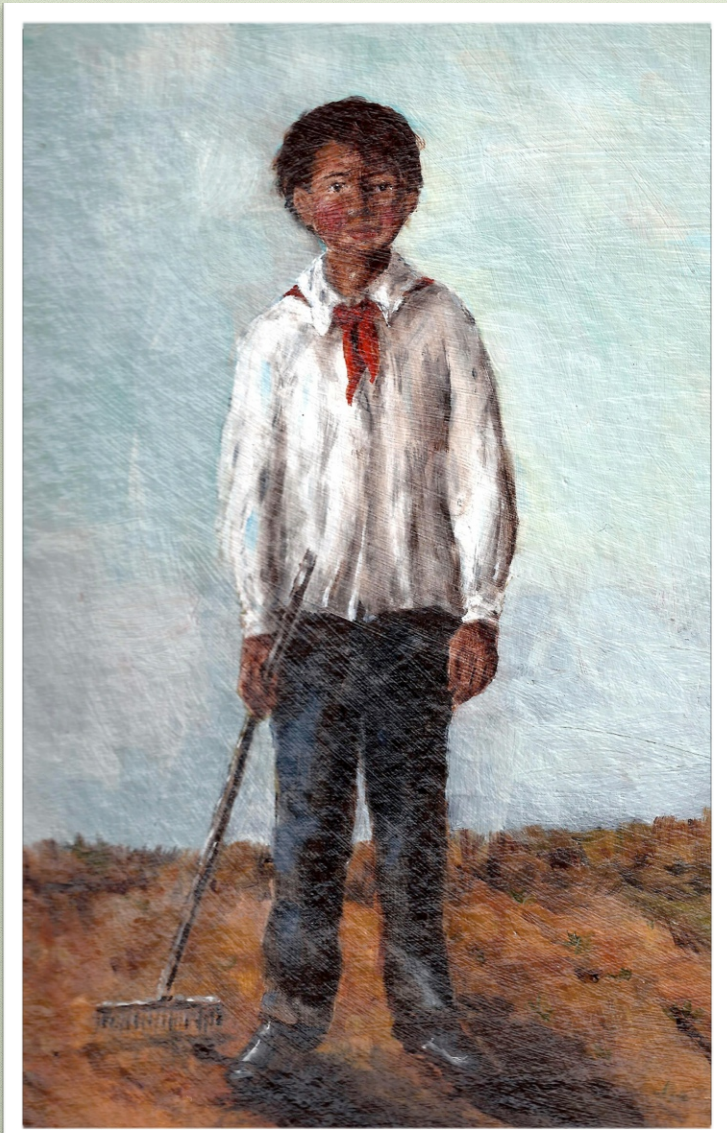
About This Project

During the summer of 2013, eight Omaha Public Schools teachers each produced an iBook on a topic of Omaha and Nebraska history as it relates to African American History. The four 3rd grade books are: Then and Now: A Look at People in Your Neighborhood; Our City, Our Culture; Civil Rights: Standing Up for What's Right to Make a Difference; and The Great Migration: Wherever People Move, Home Is Where the Heart Is. The four 4th grade books are Legends of the Name: Buffalo Soldiers in Nebraska; African American Pioneers; Notable Nebraskans; and WWII: Double Victory.

Each book was written by a local Omaha author, and illustrations were created by a local artist. Photographs, documents, and other artifacts included in the book were provided by local community members and through partnership with the Great Plains Black History Museum.

These books provide supplemental information on the role of African Americans in Omaha and Nebraska history topics. It is important to integrate this material in order to expand students' cultural understanding, and highlight all the historical figures that have built this state. Each book allows students to go beyond the content through analysis activities using photos, documents, and other artifacts. Through these iBooks, students will experience history and its connections to their own cultures and backgrounds.

LET'S GO!



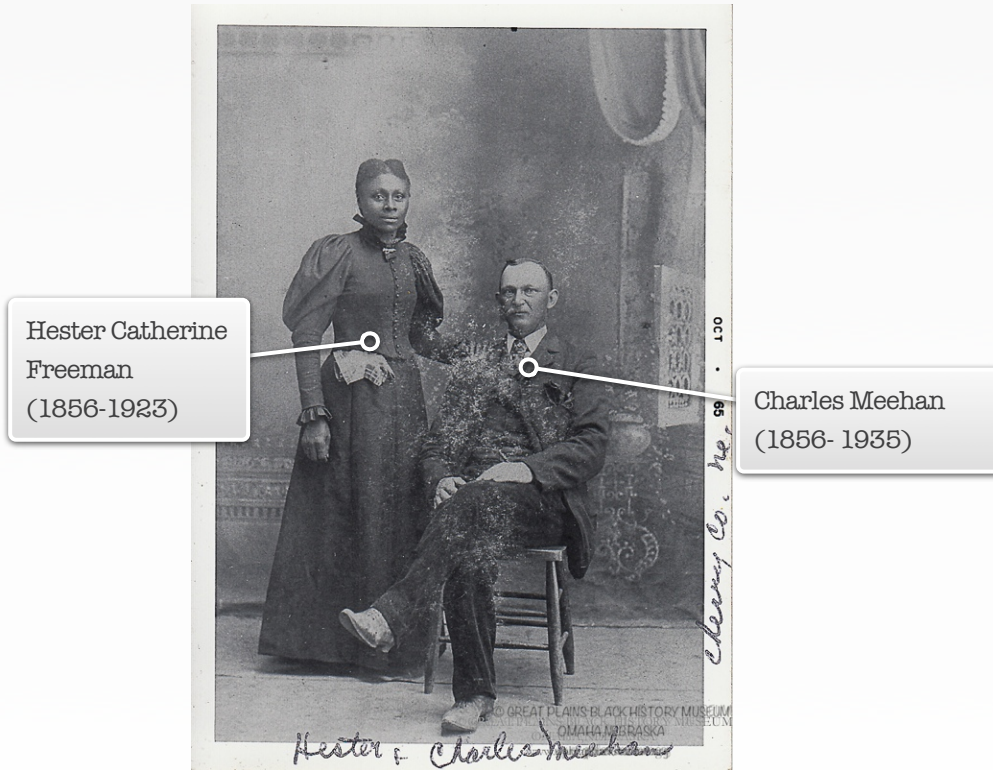
Are we there yet?



Charles Meehan wasn't sure what to do.

A white man who had grown up outside of Toronto, Canada, Meehan led one of the first groups of black settlers to Nebraska in 1885. His wife, Hester, who was black, and three other African American families joined him on the journey.

Hester and Charles Meehan



(Photos courtesy of The Great Plains Black History Museum)

What will you pack (you can bring 10 items)? P.S. No hoarders allowed.



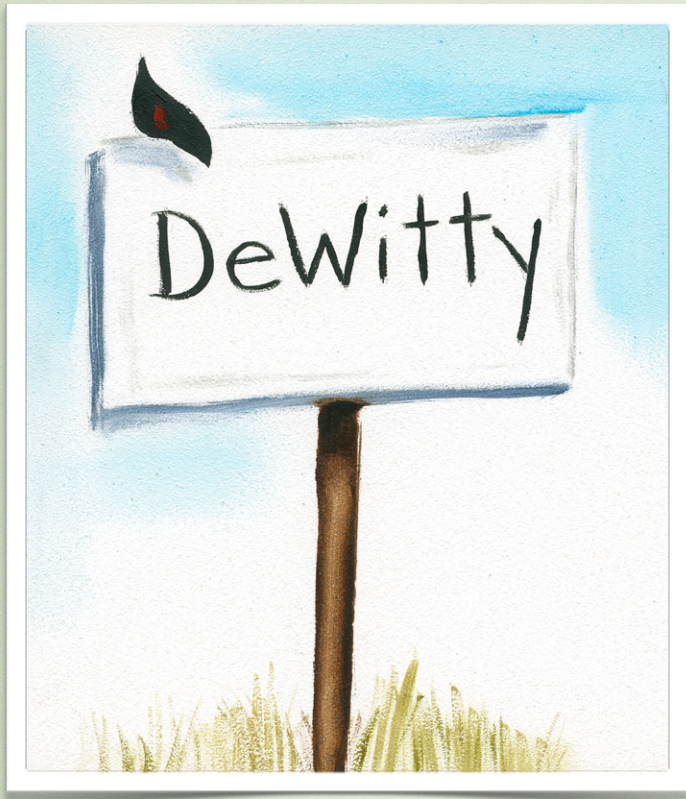
Homesteading

African Americans were encouraged to move to Nebraska by the **Homestead Act**, which promised free land for families who agreed to live there for five years and improve the land through farming.

Over the next 20 years, the settlers built a thriving community near Overton, in south central Nebraska. The Canadian settlers were used to Nebraska's cold winters and highly skilled in trades like **blacksmithing** and **carpentry**. But, they still had to grow their own food. When a **drought** struck Overton in 1905, the settlers had a decision to make – stick it out on the land they already owned or sell it and look for something better.



GETTING SETTLED



Not all of Nebraska's black settlers came from the North. The Homestead Act offered land to freed slaves, too, and many black homesteaders migrated from the American South. They faced their own unique challenges.



Discrimination

The cold and dry climate of Nebraska was a shock to many of the southern settlers. Some left after only a few years of unsuccessful farming. If they did stay, black settlers were not always welcomed. Nebraska outlawed slavery in 1861, but there were fierce debates over the next 40 years in the legislature over issues like the right of African Americans to vote or attend public schools. Discrimination made all-black towns like DeWitty much more appealing.

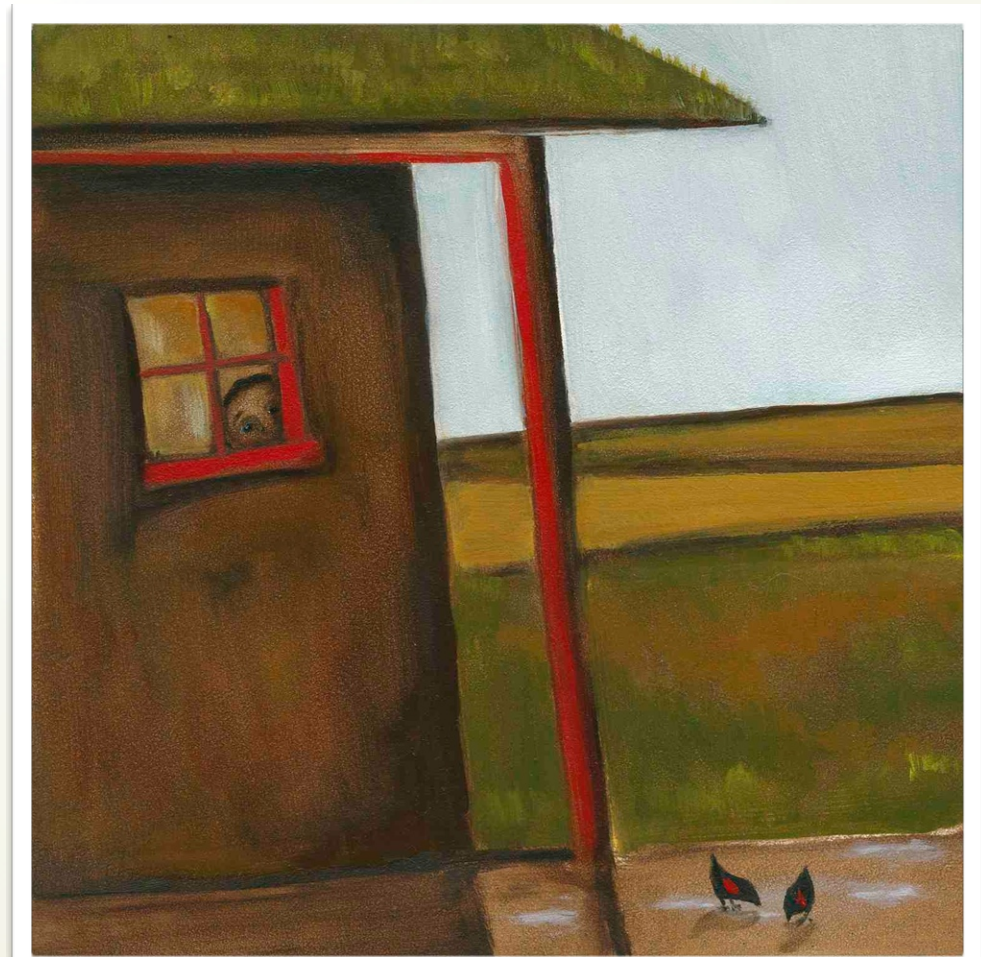


Building a Home

Moses Speese was one such former slave from the South who migrated to Nebraska and farmed his own land. After the **Thirteenth Amendment** ended slavery, Speese took his family first to Indiana, then to Seward, Nebraska, before claiming a homestead near Broken Bow in 1882. Twenty-five years later, he took his family to DeWitty where his son, Charles Speese, married Charles and Hester Meehan's daughter, Rosetta.

The land in DeWitty was free but the black settlers quickly found out life was still very difficult. The hard and dry soil was not very good for growing crops, but it was perfectly suited for one of the first jobs any homesteader had to do – building a home. There were few trees on the plains so wood for traditional homes was scarce. But there was plenty of dirt around so many homesteaders built sod houses. They would cut 2-foot long rectangles of dirt from the ground, jokingly called “Nebraska marble,” and then stack them like bricks, leaving room for wooden windows and door frames. If the family had enough money, they could

put a traditional wooden roof on the house. If not, they used more sod, this time with the grass still attached to help absorb the rain.



Signs of a Successful Homesteader: If you were lucky enough to have your picture taken, you wanted to capture your prized possessions in the photo.



Speese Family (Photo courtesy of Lily Speese Collection, Great Plains Black History Museum)

Say Cheese!

When presented with the opportunity to have their picture taken, homesteaders wanted to show off their material possessions in the photo. Some families would even bring their piano out for the photo shoot!

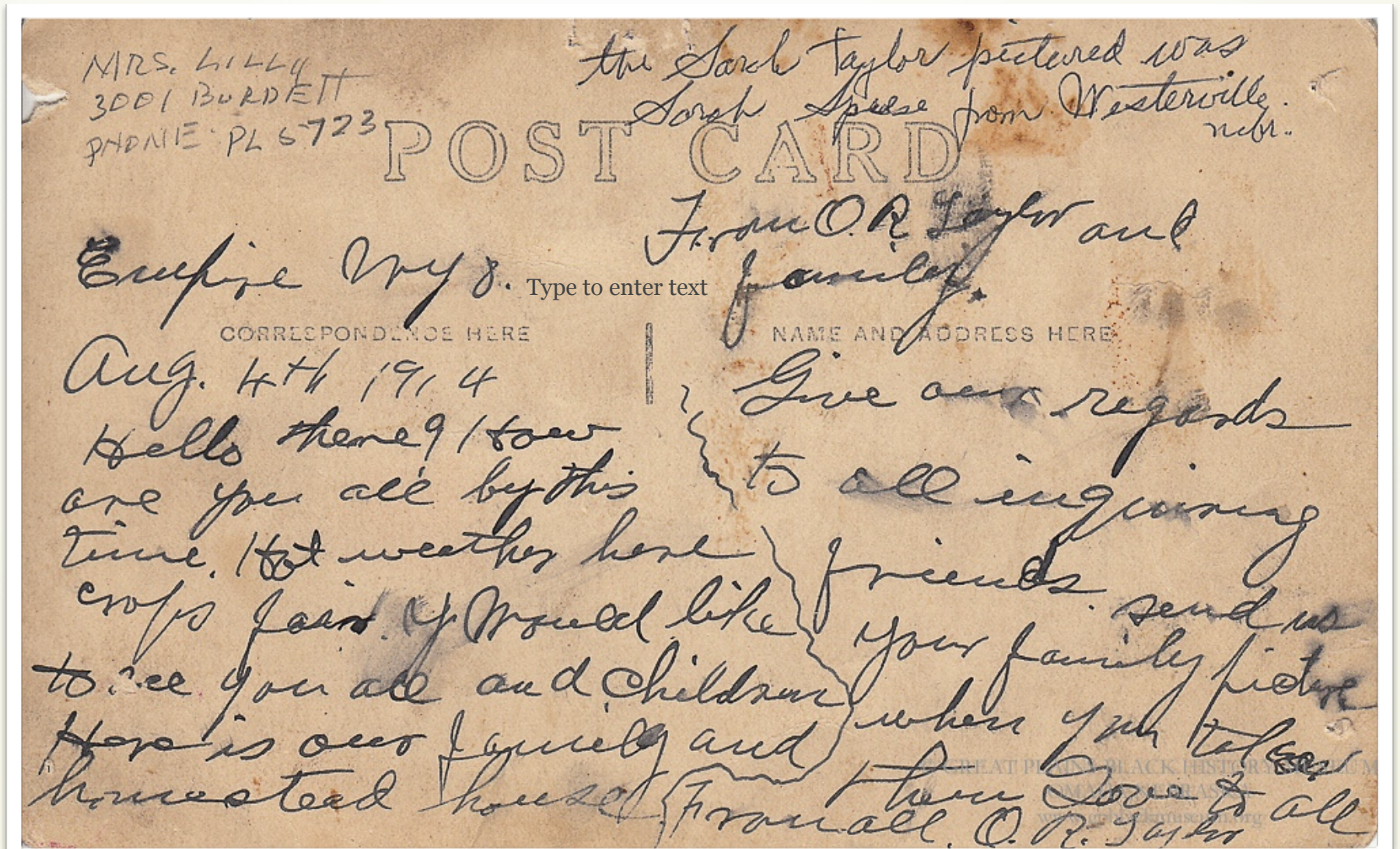
PICTURE THIS:

You and your family have just relocated to Nebraska from far, far away. You want to have a family photo taken so you can send it to your friends and relatives. Now remember, you are showing off how successful you have become since your move here.

What are five things you would want to show (brag about) in your photo?

You've got mail.....

Don't worry, it's translated on the next page.



You've got mail continued...

The Sarah Taylor pictured was Sarah Speese
from Westerville, Nebr.

From O.R. Taylor and family

Mrs. Lilly
3001 Burdett
Phone PL 5723

Empire, Wyo.

Aug. 4th, 1914

Hello there! How are you all by this time. Hot weather here. Crops fair. I would like to see you all and children. Here is our family and homestead house.

Give our regards to all inquiring friends. Send us your family picture when you take there.

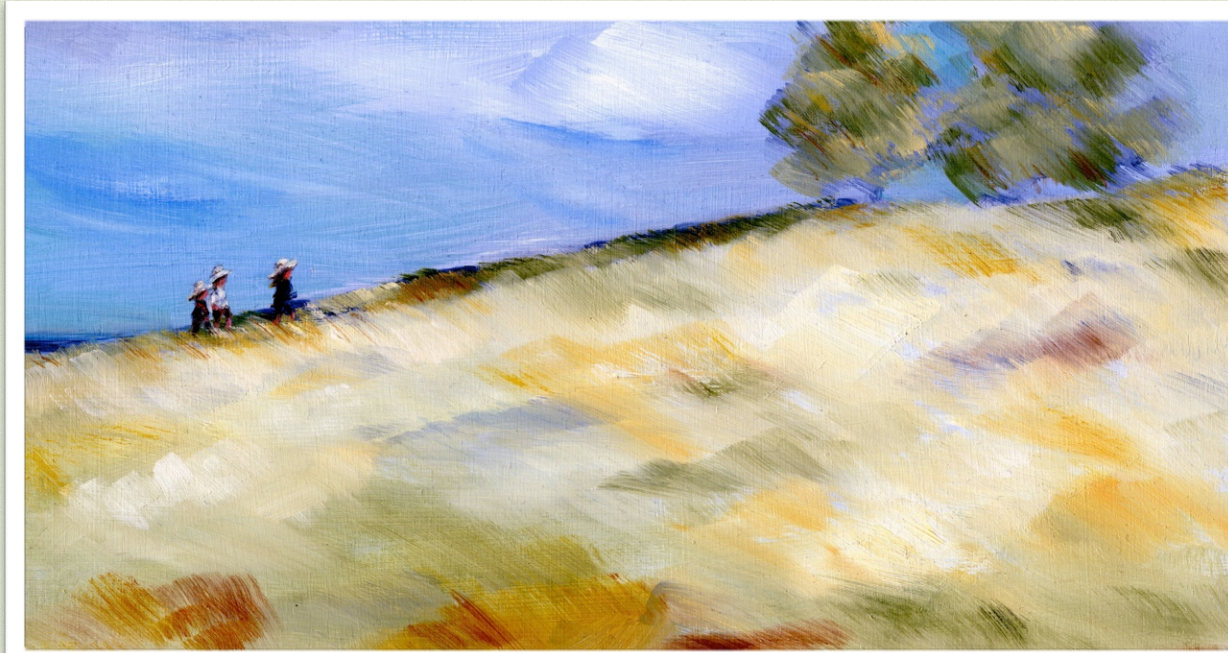
Love to all from all,

O.R. Taylor

This is a translation of the postcard from the previous page. You are a historian. While you read the postcard, think about the following questions:

1. When was this written?
2. Why were photos and mail so important?
3. Where is the postcard from and where is it going to?

ON THE ROAD AGAIN.....



A new law, the **Kinkaid Act of 1904**, promised even more land for settlers who were willing to move to Nebraska's **Sandhills**. Clem Deaver, another of Nebraska's first black settlers, asked Charles Meehan if he was willing to move the Overton settlement to join his growing homestead in Cherry County. The land there was hilly and dry, but there was the promise of a community that would help each other and understood the unique struggles black settlers faced.

With failing crops at home, Meehan made the decision to leave Overton in 1907. He and the other families loaded up three wagons and headed north to what would soon become the largest African American town in Nebraska. They named it DeWitty.

Chores

Once a home was built, the hard work would really begin. Farming in the black settlement was a job requiring an entire family. The men would typically handle tasks like plowing and planting while the women faced the enormous task of feeding and clothing a family with very few resources. The children also contributed a great deal. They fed the pigs and chickens, milked the cows, pulled weeds from the fields and collected **cow chips**, which were used to fuel the fires that heated their modest homes. In between chores, the children of DeWitty attended one of the three schools in town.



Play Ball!

While there was always work to be done, the residents of DeWitty did take some time out to have fun. Rodeos were a popular form of entertainment as were dances featuring music played by members of the community. DeWitty had a town baseball team, the Sluggers, that drew large crowds and was considered one of the best in the state.



MOVING TO THE BIG CITIES

Drawn to the unique community in DeWitty, the town flourished for a while. It grew from nearly 80 people in 1912 to close to 200 a few years later. However, the realities of farming in the Sandhills proved too much to overcome. In the 1920s, families started to leave DeWitty, giving up their farms for more reliable work in the city. By 1920, the population was down to 90 people, half of what it was a few years earlier. By 1936, the last black settler left DeWitty.

Where did the families go? Many headed for the cities of Omaha and Lincoln, where work was plentiful at the railroads and stockyards. By 1930, nearly 90 percent of African Americans in Nebraska lived in Lincoln or Omaha, changing the look of those cities in ways that can still be seen today.



Nebraska, The Good Life

Members of the Meehan and Speese families scattered all across the country. Some stayed on the plains in places like Torrington, Wyoming, and Pierre, South Dakota, to farm and ranch. Others found jobs in the cities. But, one thing they all shared was a belief that, through hard work and a sense of community, it was possible to make a good life as an African American in this state. That feeling made DeWitty one of the most unique towns in Nebraska history.



Hmmmm...

Question

What was one reason African American pioneers chose to settle in Nebraska?

- A.** It was a (slave) free state.
- B.** People were attracted to the sandhills.
- C.** There were a lot of rivers here.

Answer: A



Meehan and Sons (Courtesy of: Great Plains Black History Museum)

SO WHAT?

1. Why is this story important?
2. What does it tell you about the settlement of African Americans in Nebraska?
3. What did you know about African American pioneers before you read this?
4. Why were children so important to early settlers?

Try This!

Have a pioneer day with your class. Use as few modern day conveniences as possible.

-Use chalk boards, share books, don't use notebooks or turn the lights on.

-Tell your mom to pack your sandwich in cloth instead of plastic baggies. Bring your lunch in a pail or a cloth bag.

-At recess play marbles or jump rope, OR research pioneer children's games.

-Use your imagination and brainstorm ideas to make the day as authentic as possible.

Glossary of Terms

Blacksmithing

To create items such as tools from iron or steel.

Carpentry

Using wood to make items such as tools or desks.

Cow chips

Poop, dung, kaka, #2

Drought

A period of months or years with no precipitation (rain or snow).

Homestead Act

The Homestead Act of 1862: President Abraham Lincoln signed into law this act which gave 160 acres (1 acre is about the size of a football field) of public land to small farmers at a low cost. This act gave large amounts of public land (land for everyone to use) to private citizens, people like me and you.

270 million acres , or 10% of the land in the United States was settled under this act.

In order to qualify or get this land you had to be 21 years old and the head of your household. Who were these people?

New immigrants, or people who just moved to the United States from other countries

Farmers from the eastern part of the U.S. who didn't own their own land

Single women

Former slaves

There was an \$18 fee which is like \$200 today AND you had to live on the land and “prove up” which is farming and making improvements to the land. You had 5 years to do this.

Kinkaid Act of 1904

Named after Moses Kinkaid (a Nebraska Congressman), this act granted 640 acre homesteads to settlers in western Nebraska.

These lands were primarily used for raising cattle (ranching).

Sandhills

Located in western Nebraska. This region of prairie is unique in the fact that any grass that *can* grow, is grown on on sand dunes which are hills of sand.

Thirteenth Amendment

The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery in 1865. The Constitution is the highest law in America.

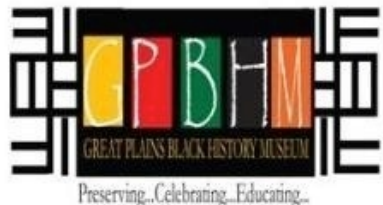


Black Families of Cherry County (Courtesy of: Great Plains Black History Museum)

This book created in partnership with



Making Invisible Histories Visible



THE Sherwood FOUNDATION®

Directed by: Emily Brush

Edited by: Dr. Jared Leighton

Historical Consultant: Dr. Patrick Jones

Special thanks to Harris Payne and Barry Thomas

Making Invisible Histories Visible is an initiative of the Omaha Public Schools