Black Frontiers

by Lillian Schlissel

Expository text gives information about real people and events. Look for information about real events from America’s history as you read.

Question of the Week: What does it mean to be a pioneer?
Leaving the South

When the Civil War ended, men and women who had been slaves waited to see what freedom would bring. The land they farmed still belonged to the families who had once owned them, and because they had no money, former slaves were expected to pay back a share of their crops in exchange for seed, plows, and mules. They had to pay back a share of everything they raised for rent and food. These sharecroppers soon found they were perpetually in debt.

In 1879, a Louisiana sharecropper named John Lewis Solomon, his wife, and four children packed their belongings and started walking toward the Mississippi River. Along the riverbank they found other black families waiting for a chance to travel north. Some built rafts to carry them over the river’s dangerous undertows and eddies. Others had money for passage, but riverboat captains would not let them on board. When a steamboat called the Grand Tower came close to shore, John Lewis Solomon called to the captain that he could pay his way. He said he had been a soldier in the Union Army, “I know my rights, and if you refuse to carry me on your boat, I will go to the United States Court and sue for damages.” Solomon took a great risk, but the captain agreed to let him and his family board the steamboat.

Reaching Kansas, Solomon said, “This is free ground. Then I looked on the heavens, and I said, ‘That is free and beautiful heaven.’ Then I looked within my heart, and I said to myself, ‘I wonder why I was never free before.’”

Black families waited on the banks of the Mississippi River for a chance to go North.
Homesteading was not easy for black or white settlers. Rocks, grass, and trees had to be cleared before crops could be planted. A farmer needed a horse, a mule, and a plow. He needed seed to plant and food for his family until the crops were ready to harvest. Most of all, a pioneer needed a home.

In regions where there were trees, pioneers built log cabins. But in Kansas and Nebraska, there was only tall grass, as high as a man’s shoulder. Pioneers learned that tough root systems under the grass held the dirt firmly, and sod could be cut like bricks and piled, layer upon layer, until it took the shape of a house. These homesteaders were called sod busters, and their homes were called soddies.

Sod homes could be warm and comfortable. Some were two stories high, with glass windows and chimneys. But in heavy rain, smaller sod houses leaked, and some families remembered being surprised by a snake slithering through a wall.

In North and South Dakota, where the land was rocky and winter temperatures fell to 30 degrees below zero, early pioneers burrowed into the ground and covered themselves with an earthen roof. They brought their small animals into the house in the winter, while cows and goats huddled on the roof, warming themselves on the house that was under their feet.

During the first seasons in a new settlement, a pioneer woman might have no stove. She dug a hole in the ground and fed the fire with weeds, adding small rocks, like coals, to keep in the fire’s heat. Buffalo chips, the droppings of buffalo, provided the fuel. When the great animals migrated across the land, women and children gathered chips for the family’s cooking fires.

In the hot and dry climate of the Southwest, pioneers built homes with thick walls made of mud and straw. The mud walls, called adobe, kept the houses cool in the summer and warm in the winter. In desert regions, women learned from the Indians to brew teas out of wild grasses and to make soap and shampoo from the yucca plant.

In the early days of settlement, there were few black families homesteading. For them, loneliness was part of being a pioneer. But black pioneer families held on, and in sticking it out, they made the way easier for those who came after.
Men and women who had been slaves read in the Bible about the ancient Israelites who were brought out of bondage and delivered into freedom. Benjamin Singleton, born a slave in Tennessee, was determined that he would bring his people to free soil if it was the last thing he ever did. After the Civil War, Singleton visited Kansas and over a period of years, he and his friends managed to buy part of a Cherokee reservation. In 1877 they advertised for homesteaders to start an all-black community there. They hoped to attract two hundred families. Fliers promised that settlers who paid one dollar “in installments of 25 cents at a time or otherwise as may be desired” could be part of the new community. By 1879 an exodus of black families out of the Old South began, and before long there were eight hundred homesteaders in the new Kansas communities of Dunlap and Nicodemus. Benjamin Singleton said, “My people that I carried to Kansas came on our own resources. We have tried to make a people of ourselves. . . .” They were known as the Exodusters.

In the early days of the town the farmers in Nicodemus owned only three horses. One man plowed with a milk cow, and others broke ground with shovels and spades. White farmers saw how hard their new neighbors worked and lent the new settlers a team of oxen and a plow. Black farmers planted their first crops and in time they prospered. By the turn of the century, there were about eight thousand black homesteaders in Nicodemus and Dunlap.

Handbills encouraged black families to move to Kansas. Notice the warning at the bottom of the flier.

Schoolhouse in Dunlap, Kansas. Pupil in foreground carries a sign that reads, “God Bless Our School.”
Some black settlers moved farther west to Nebraska and Oklahoma, where they built three new black communities—Taft, Langston, and Boley. George Washington Bush went all the way to Oregon Territory, where he introduced the first mower and reaper into the area around Puget Sound.

Of all the black communities, however, Nicodemus and Dunlap remained the most famous. Each year they celebrated the Fourth of July, and they had their own special holiday, Emancipation Day. On July 31 and August 1, a square mile of land was set aside as a carnival fairground. There were boxing matches and baseball games. In 1907 the town formed one of the nation’s first black baseball teams—the Nicodemus Blues. The Blues played black teams as far away as Texas, Nevada, and Louisiana. Satchel Paige, one of the greatest black pitchers in American baseball history, played ball in Nicodemus.

In 1976 Nicodemus was designated a National Historic Landmark. The town’s history is being recorded and buildings restored. It marks the proud legacy of black homesteaders in America.
During the Civil War, nearly 180,000 black troops fought with the Union Army against the Confederacy, and more than 33,000 gave their lives to end slavery. After the war, General Ulysses S. Grant ordered Generals Philip Sheridan and William Tecumseh Sherman to organize regiments of black cavalry. These were designated the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, each containing about a thousand men under the command of white commissioned officers—Colonel Edward Hatch for the Ninth and Colonel Benjamin Grierson for the Tenth. Two black regiments of infantry were organized, the Twenty-fourth and the Twenty-fifth. George Armstrong Custer refused to command black troops, but others accepted their tasks gladly.

Black troops who had been farmers, cooks, carpenters, and blacksmiths came from all parts of the country. The Army paid them thirteen dollars a month plus rations and sent them to the most desolate and dangerous frontier outposts, where they served under the harshest conditions with the oldest equipment. They fought Indian tribes few soldiers wished to encounter—the Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, Apache, Ute, and Sioux.

It was the Indians who gave the name Buffalo Soldiers because their hair resembled the shaggy coats of the buffalo. The buffalo was sacred to the Indians, and the men of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry accepted the name as a badge of honor, and the buffalo became a prominent part of their regimental crest.

Thirteen men of the Buffalo Soldiers won the highest military award of the nation, the Congressional Medal of Honor.
When all-black regiments were disbanded after World War II, almost one hundred years after they were organized, the Tenth Cavalry became the 510th Tank Battalion. But memories of frontier days were strong, and the 510th was redesignated the Tenth Cavalry in 1958 and stationed at Fort Knox, Kentucky.

A bronze statue in memory of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry was dedicated in 1992 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to commemorate the courage of the Buffalo Soldiers and mark their place in American military history.

The Buffalo Soldiers helped to bring law and order to regions where ranchers fought with farmers, where Indian tribes warred with each other and with settlers, and where bandits threatened to overrun small towns. On rare occasions, settlers acknowledged their great debt to the black troops. When the Twenty-fifth was ordered to duty in the Spanish-American War, the people of Missoula, Montana, postponed Easter church services so that they could line up along the town’s main street and wave goodbye to the black troops who had become their protectors and friends.

Over the years, that strange name, Buffalo Soldiers, became a prized possession of those black troops who left a legacy of courageous service in U.S. military history.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to suggest that the frontier was without prejudice. It had its share of violence and racial injustice. As settlements grew into cities, Jim Crow segregation laws confronted black settlers. But on those lonely, dangerous, and beautiful lands we call the frontier, black pioneers built new lives. Born into slavery, African Americans had the same dreams of freedom and independence as did all other Americans. Given the chance, they proved time and again that they possessed skills, initiative, and courage.

West of the Mississippi, between 1850 and 1900, there were some ten thousand African American exodusters, homesteaders, and sod busters. There were also four thousand miners, eight thousand wranglers and rodeo riders, and some five thousand Buffalo Soldiers. According to some historians, there were some eighty thousand African Americans doing whatever else the frontier demanded. They were trappers and mountain men, hotel keepers, and scouts. They were businessmen and women, teachers, and nurses.

And they were cowboys. From the Chisholm Trail to Hollywood, the American cowboy is a hero who walks tall. It is important to remember, then, that some of America’s best cowboys and rodeo riders were black, and that some of our bravest pioneers were African Americans who lived and worked on America’s western frontiers.
Think Critically

1. How might the post-Civil War years have been different for black frontierspeople if there had been little open land in the West? **Text to World**

2. To see why this author included old photographs, select one and study it for one full minute. Then cover it and report the scene as if you were there. **Think Like an Author**

3. The author tells us that the Indians gave the black troops the name Buffalo Soldiers because of their hair. How did the troops respond to this name given to them? **Cause and Effect**

4. How did adding your prior knowledge about America after the Civil War to the information in the text help you make inferences to better understand what you read? **Inferring**

5. **Look Back and Write** Who and where were the Exodusters? Did they succeed? Review pages 94–95. Provide evidence to support your answer. **Extended Response**

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**Objectives**
- Provide evidence from the text to demonstrate understanding.
- Read independently for a sustained period of time and paraphrase the reading.

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**Envision It! Retell**

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