

## FROM MILITARY FORTS TO "NIGGER TOWNS": AFRICAN AMERICANS IN NORTH DAKOTA, 1890-1940 by Stephanie Abbot Roper

The period from 1890 to 1940 marked a turbulent era for African American residents of North Dakota.

The variety of jobs that employed African Americans during the first fifty years of statehood increased, yet black men and women faced greater challenges in both urban and rural parts of the state. Following the trends that began during territorial days, many of the black people who entered the state remained only temporarily. Among these transients were African American soldiers, farm laborers, porters, and baseball players. Although many black homesteaders and urban dwellers intended to remain in North Dakota and even organized black churches, most African Americans found it difficult to endure the hardships of a score of drought and depression years in the 1920s and 1930s. By 1940 the diminishing, unstable black community could not support itself; thus, barely over two hundred black residents lived in North Dakota that year, the lowest number since African Americans labored as servants for the Seventh Cavalry in territorial days.

Shortly after North Dakota achieved statehood in 1889, African Americans entered the state as part of the United States military. These black men were not the same servants and cooks as those who toiled for the military a decade earlier. Rather, these men enlisted as soldiers in two of the four all-black regiments in the West created after the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> The four regiments that served in western states and territories included the Ninth and Tenth Cavalries and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantries. From these regiments, companies from the Tenth Cavalry and Twenty-fifth Infantry were stationed in North Dakota from 1891 to 1895.

At least one soldier from the all-black regiments had travelled to northern Dakota Territory in pre-statehood days. The 1885 Territorial census enumerated one African American soldier, Private George Weaver, a member of the Twenty-fifth Infantry, on its list of soldiers stationed at Fort Abraham Lincoln.<sup>2</sup> At the time, companies from the same infantry were stationed in southern Dakota at Fort Hale, Fort Meade, and headquartered at Fort Randall as well as at Fort Snelling in Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> Private Weaver possibly acted as courier or delivered mail from one of these posts to Fort Lincoln, which would explain his singular presence in northern Dakota Territory.

The federal government introduced many more African American soldiers into North Dakota in 1891. On July 21, 1891 Companies "B" and "C" of the Twenty-fifth Infantry arrived at Fort Buford from Fort Shaw, Montana with five

white officers and seventy-nine African American enlisted men. Company "E" of the Twenty-fifth Infantry followed on September 19, 1891 from Camp Poplar River, Montana. Additionally, the Tenth Cavalry's Troop "H" arrived from Fort Grant, Arizona on May 5, 1892 and Troop "D" on December 16, 1892.<sup>4</sup> As the all-black regiments arrived at Fort Buford, the government transferred most of the white companies that had been stationed there to other western posts. Indeed, beginning in May 1892, only African American enlisted men served at Fort Buford.

In April 1893 the number of black servicemen at Fort Buford reached its maximum of 282 soldiers. In addition, the post contained over a hundred women and children attached to the fort, some of whom undoubtedly were African American. The post surgeon's report named at least three children fathered by enlisted men; three other children of African American soldiers died and were interred at the post cemetery during the four years that African Americans resided at the post.<sup>5</sup>

While at Fort Buford in its waning days, the soldiers performed their garrison duties well and retained excellent habits and morale.<sup>6</sup> Their usual responsibilities included endless drills, fatigues, and guard duties as well as chores such as collecting wood and tending the gardens. Some of the enlisted men volunteered as school teachers for both post children and other soldiers, many of whom were quite eager to learn.<sup>7</sup> Companies from both the Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fifth Infantry formed baseball teams and played whenever time permitted.<sup>8</sup> Along with these activities, the companies worked together to forge an excellent military band. The post band practiced and performed to the appreciation of officers and citizens from the burgeoning neighboring town of Williston. As one pioneer remembered, "the music was furnished by a negro orchestra from Buford. At that time Buford's soldiers were all negroes. And those boys sure could play."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to routine duties, the troops participated in a number of training maneuvers and practice marches. Some of these lasted for weeks, with the men travelling over four hundred miles. In July 1894 the majority of the Tenth Cavalry left for Glendive, Montana to protect Northern Pacific railroad property from strikers who threatened violence.<sup>10</sup> This encounter represented the sole policing duty that any of the all-black companies faced while stationed in North Dakota.

The year 1895 held two significant developments for the men at Fort Buford. In April of that year one of the most spectacular trials in North Dakota occurred. The case involved the alleged murder of Fort Buford's tailor by private Henry McElroy, an African American soldier from the Tenth Cavalry's troop "H." A number of officers and enlisted men travelled to Bismarck where they served as witnesses before the jury which tried the case. As the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* related, "The court room was crowded with spectators and witnesses, the case having attracted considerable attention and excited much interest."<sup>11</sup> A well-publicized three day trial ensued in which most of the subpoenaed black soldiers

spoke in McElroy's defense. After the accused finished his testimony, the jury quickly rendered a verdict of not guilty. Once the trial was completed, the *Tribune* stated:

The colored soldiers who have been down from Fort Buford for several weeks, as witnesses on the McElroy trial, left for home on the early train this morning. The boys have had quite a relief from the monotony of post life while here, and have enjoyed their outing.<sup>12</sup>

The soldiers who returned to Fort Buford after the trial remained at the post for only another five months. In 1895 the federal government ordered the post abandoned. At that time, most of the 216 black enlisted men from the five African American companies moved to Fort Assiniboine, Montana. When Fort Buford was officially abandoned on October 1, 1895, only one officer and fifteen men from the Twenty-fifth Infantry remained to close the post.<sup>13</sup>

Few of the soldiers from the Tenth Cavalry and Twenty-fifth Infantry remained in North Dakota once their terms of enlistment expired or after their regiments were reassigned elsewhere. However, at least five African American veterans of the Civil War did settle in North Dakota. Of them, the most famous veteran was Blakely Durant, known to many throughout the country as "Old Shady." Enlisting as a private in the 71st Ohio Volunteer Infantry in February 1862, Durant served as a cook for Generals James B. McPherson and Ulysses S. Grant; for much of the war he worked as personal cook for General William T. Sherman who called Durant his "faithful old colored servant." In the 1880s Durant retired to Grand Forks with his two sons, where he died in 1895. As his obituary states, "He was a highly respected and esteemed citizen of Grand Forks. Indeed, everybody loved 'Old Shady,' for he was a large, warm-hearted man, a true friend, a kind and loving parent."<sup>14</sup>

The other African American veterans of the Civil War who settled in North Dakota located there in order to farm. Pete McGregory moved to Morton County, while Preston Mayo, Isham Evans, and William Montgomery resided in the Red River Valley. Like Durant, Preston Mayo served as a camp cook for General Grant's officers before settling near Larimore.<sup>15</sup> Isham Evans reportedly worked as a hostler (or stableman) for the Union Army during the Civil War. After his military career ended, Evans settled with his wife and three children in Page Township, Cass County where he managed A. F. Giddings' homestead land.<sup>16</sup> On November 5, 1890 Evans filed for his own homestead quarter and filed for another 160 acres in 1896 on which he supported a general farm. His son Charles managed the farm until his death in 1927. Isham Evans' step-daughter, Ella Bryant, remained in Page throughout her life (1884-1970) and became a highly respected and beloved member of the community.<sup>17</sup>

The fifth Civil War veteran to settle in North Dakota, William T. Montgomery, had been a slave to Joseph Davis, brother of Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederacy. During the Civil War, he enlisted for a year in the

Union Navy as an officer's steward on the U.S.S. *Carondelet*.<sup>18</sup> After the war Montgomery served as a village postmaster and in 1879 as treasurer of Warren County, Mississippi. In 1884 Montgomery moved to North Dakota where he bought 640 acres in Eagle Township, Richland County from the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad. Montgomery soon added to his holdings until he owned 1,020 acres, a large homestead, and a grain elevator. A small community developed in the vicinity, which he named Lithia after his mother.<sup>19</sup>

Montgomery remained in North Dakota for less than a decade before becoming disenchanted with the forbidding climate and the difficulties in raising wheat. Still, he possessed the most acreage of any African American farmer in North Dakota history. In fact, a black newspaper in Minneapolis called him "the largest colored farmer in the Northwest." *The (Fargo, ND) Daily Argus* dubbed him "a most worthy man."<sup>20</sup> Further, he accumulated such a substantial reputation while in North Dakota that the territorial government honored him in 1884 by naming him "commissioner for the colored department, to represent Dakota at the World's exposition at New Orleans."<sup>21</sup>

Civil War veterans were not the only African Americans who staked homestead claims in North Dakota. As Thomas Newgard, author of the section on African Americans in *Plains Folk* has noted, at least seventy African American people filed for homestead claims throughout the state between 1880 and 1920. At least five of these were women.<sup>22</sup> The state attracted most of those filing claims during the first two decades of the twentieth century, especially after the federal government revised the homestead laws in 1909 and promised more readily available free land.

Some African American farm laborers followed Isham Evans' example and labored for others until they could buy their own land. At least six black men came to North Dakota in the late 1800s as farm laborers, then either homesteaded or rented land first before they could buy outright. Many homesteaded near where they toiled as laborers. These include John Tyler, a former cook for both Teddy Roosevelt and the Marquise de Mores, who homesteaded in Slope County and farmed there with his wife and adopted daughter until his death in 1928. Similarly, John Millett, son of a Seventh Cavalry soldier and black servant, labored for years in Bismarck and Morton County before filing for a preemption claim in 1908.<sup>23</sup>

In 1910 African Americans either owned or rented twenty-two farms in North Dakota. (See Table 1) Most of the state's African American farmers operated general farms in which they grew a variety of vegetables and grains and owned domestic animals. A few notable exceptions included farmers in Bottineau, Eddy, and Pembina Counties who grew grain crops to sell at market.<sup>24</sup> Those who worked general farms often produced little more than they needed for subsistence. Many general farmers, both black and white, could not generate a large enough surplus to profit off their farming experiences while in North Dakota.

As in territorial days, many black farmers found that they could not survive by subsistence farming, especially during the 1920s and 1930s when drought devastated the region. Some African American farmers such as Burt Lee and his family worked their farm in Missouri Ridge Township in Williams County during the summer and moved to Williston to work as painters and paper hangers in the winter.<sup>25</sup>

Table I

FARMS OPERATED BY AFRICAN AMERICANS PER COUNTY, 1910<sup>26</sup>

Number	County	Total Acreage	Value
1	Billings	160	\$4,100
2	Cass	1,280	\$58,400
1	Grand Forks	320	\$11,450
1	Kidder	320	\$8,500
2	McHenry	760	\$21,600
2	McKenzie	320	\$3,975
1	McLean	320	\$7,400
3	Morton	324	\$7,950
2	Pierce	400	\$11,400
1	Rolette	160	\$1,600
1	Stark	160	\$5,350
3	Ward	640	\$15,600
2	Williams	320	\$6,225
22	total	5,484	\$163,550

This table shows the number of farms owned or rented by African American farmers in 1910. This census year marked the zenith for the black farmer in terms of number of farms, and total acres. Although the total dollar value of farms operated by black farmers rose to \$285,740 in 1920, African Americans were already beginning to abandon agriculture by that time.

James Garrison in Driscoll began farming a homestead in 1902 and also supplemented his income as a cook in the village. His brother Tony Thompson rented a farm south of Driscoll, but also hired out as a cook and worked for Governor Lynn J. Frazier during the winters of 1917, 1919, and 1921.<sup>27</sup> Philip Whamsley, known as "Nigger Phil," the only black man in McLean County, owned a general farm in Washburn, but also cooked for threshing crews and supplied firewood for the neighboring school.<sup>28</sup> Other black farmers worked as barbers or as laborers to augment their incomes.

Most black people who lived in rural areas did not earn their livelihood as independent farmers but often were employed as farm workers. According to the

1910 census returns, ninety-five black people labored in agriculture in that year, including twelve women. Of these people, forty-six worked on the twenty-two farms which they either owned or rented. The remaining forty-nine people toiled as farm laborers.<sup>29</sup>

Almost all of the forty-six African American men who worked as farm laborers were unwed, as were the three black women employed as cooks or house servants to farmers. Few of these hired laborers settled on farms for an extended period of time. Rather, most maintained a transient lifestyle, moving from farm to farm and state to state. While many of the African American farm owners retained their farms from 1910 to 1920, few if any farm laborers remained hired hands from one census to the next, especially after the debilitating hardships rural North Dakota faced during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

By 1940, the number of African Americans employed in agriculture, both those who owned or rented farms and those who worked as paid laborers, had dramatically decreased. (See Table 2) While the total value of farms reached a height of \$285,740 in 1920, that number plummeted to \$62,700 in 1930 and to a meager \$7,500 in 1940. The number of farms operated by African Americans similarly plunged, numbering twenty-four in 1920, but only ten remained in 1930 and four in 1940.<sup>31</sup>

Table II

FARMS OPERATED BY AFRICAN AMERICANS PER COUNTY, 1930<sup>32</sup>

Number	County	Total Acreage	Value
1	Benson	222 (Own)	\$3,400
1	Burleigh	160 (Rent)	\$2,400
1	Cass	160 (Rent)	\$4,000
1	Grant	320 (Rent)	\$6,000
1	McHenry	240 (Own)	\$6,000
1	Mountrail	293 (Own)	\$6,000
1	Nelson	420 (Own)	\$16,800
1	Pierce	240 (Rent)	\$4,000
1	Ramsey	230 (Own)	\$10,000
1	Sargent	280 (Rent)	\$5,600
10	total	2,565	\$62,700

This table displays the sharp decline in farms operated by black farmers since the peak in 1910. The number of farms plummeted still further during the Great Depression; by 1940 only four African American farmers in North Dakota operated farms worth an aggregate of \$7,500.

The Great Depression affected not only black farmers; rural North Dakotans, both white and black, suffered under the profound economic distress. The 1920s and 1930s represented a time of extreme drought and crop disasters in which thousands of whites as well as blacks throughout the Great Plains gave up farming. Between 1920 and 1940, the number of farms operated by all races in North Dakota decreased by over 3,700 (from 77,690 to 73,962) and the number owned outright dropped precipitously from 34,051 in 1920 to 18,651 in 1940.<sup>33</sup>

Although all races experienced great deprivations and many farm owners withdrew from the state, black people proportionally suffered the greatest hardships. By 1930, only thirty-seven African Americans worked in agriculture, fifteen owners and their families and the remaining twenty-two were wage laborers. Many of these laborers and farm tenants, as well as some owners, left the state as the drought and depression worsened during the "Dirty Thirties." By 1940 only fifteen black people, all men, out of the forty-six African Americans residing in rural areas of the state in that year worked in agriculture.<sup>34</sup>

Even before farming conditions worsened, more and more African Americans congregated in towns and cities rather than in rural areas. The majority of black people resided in the most populous counties. Further, they often lived in the most urban areas of those counties. For example, from 1910 to 1925 all but one of the African Americans in Ramsey County, which contained approximately ten percent of the state's black residents, lived in the city of Devils Lake. Similar circumstances occurred throughout the state in which most of the black people in Morton, Stutsman, and Williams Counties lived in Mandan, Jamestown, and Williston respectively.<sup>35</sup>

The highest African American population of any county during the first fifty years of statehood was in Cass County in 1910. Except for twelve black people in rural areas, mainly relatives of Isham Evans in Page and Rochester townships, the majority of black people lived in Fargo. Fargo's black population was unique since the census did not record the presence of any black children in the city in that year. Most of Fargo's African Americans were unmarried relative newcomers who lived near the railroad tracks and held jobs as porters, janitors, cooks, shoeshines, servants, or were involved in prostitution.<sup>36</sup>

The African American women and men who lived in towns and urban areas worked in a variety of jobs. Although the majority of African American women did not work outside of the home, some black women did seek wage employment. The 1910 census enumerated 86 of the 198 black women of working age as gainfully employed in North Dakota.<sup>37</sup> While most women who worked served as personal servants, cooks, and laundresses, some women gained relative economic independence through proprietorships or professional positions. In Venturia, McIntosh County, the teacher of the first school in 1907 was a black woman named Mattie B. Anderson.<sup>38</sup> Two additional African American women served as teachers in 1910. Other black professional women worked as music

teachers, trained nurses, or retail dealers. Ten African American women either owned or served as proprietors of boarding houses or restaurants.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the "boarding houses" that black women ran were brothels. In Fargo and Minot black women worked as proprietors of several "houses of ill fame" in the early twentieth century. In 1910 there were three black proprietresses on Third Street North in Fargo. These three madams employed at least eight African American women as "Inmates."<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Minot's High Third Street contained many bars and brothels, with prostitutes, both white and black and a few black proprietresses. One madam, called "Ma Butler," employed black girls as a majority of her prostitutes. As a neighbor to the Third Street brothels remembered:

It seems as though most of them being black, when they would go downtown, the public knew who they were. But when we would go to these exclusive stores to shop, they were treated great because they had plenty of money to spend. Then they were recognized.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the prostitutes, but white and black, were extremely transient, staying only a year or two before moving to other cities.

A smaller percentage of African American men than women were employed as professionals, and none owned boardinghouses or brothels. Continuing the trend that began during territorial days, most black men toiled in low paying menial labor or increasingly in the personal service industries. Many black men throughout the state worked as cooks, bootblacks, janitors, porters, and barbers. The practice which began during territorial days of the only black person in a town, or in some cases a county, working as a barber continued into the twentieth century. Black entrepreneurs established barber shops, bootblack or shoeshine stands, and lunch counters in many of the larger towns and cities throughout the state.<sup>42</sup>

In both rural and urban areas, the employment that superseded that of independent barber as the most common job for black men in the service industry was that of porter. In territorial days, the position of porter did not employ a great number of black men, but by 1910 twenty percent of all black male workers in North Dakota served as porters in barber shops, hotels, or restaurants or for railroads.<sup>43</sup> In Grand Forks in 1910, for example, fourteen men worked as porters in barber shops or hotels and for the railroads. Thus, the occupation of porter represented over forty percent of all jobs held by Grand Forks black men in that year.<sup>44</sup>

The position that retained the highest percentage of African American male workers throughout the first fifty years of North Dakota's statehood was that of common laborer. The urban areas of Bismarck and Fargo employed most of their black populations as laborers at various times from 1900 to 1920. Likewise, in the cities of Devils Lake and Minot for the entire period between 1900 to 1920, the majority of black men worked as laborers. The 1920 census recorded sixteen of

Minot's twenty-eight African American men as possessing gainful employment as laborers. Many of these laborers in Minot and Devils Lake were employed by the Great Northern Railroad.<sup>45</sup>

Numerous African American men in both rural and urban areas of North Dakota found employment through the railroads. In many towns where railroad lines were being laid, black laborers worked on the construction gangs along with Italians, Irish, and Japanese. Black railroad workers toiled to lay tracks during the building of railroad lines in rural Flasher, Mott, and Mondak during the 1910s.<sup>46</sup> Upon completion of the lines, many black men obtained employment either as porters on the trains or in the stations or as railroad company laborers.

The highest number of African Americans working for the railroads lived in Minot and Devils Lake. Both of these cities developed areas near the station or roundhouse where black laborers lived with their families. Minot's High Third Street and Devil Lake's Minnewaukan Avenue each were dubbed "Nigger Town" because of their proportionately high concentration of African Americans. As the *Minot Daily News* stated in an article entitled "Minot's Colored Colony Growing," the estimated black population of the city remained largely in their own quarter but were "beginning to invade districts nearer the downtown sections."<sup>47</sup>

Neither the African American populations of Minot nor Devils Lake could survive the economic downturn of the 1930s. The railroads provided steady and relatively secure employment throughout the drought years of the 1920s and Minot's black population actually increased during that decade. However, the depression years forced the Great Northern Railroad to reduce its work force. With no employment, African American porters and laborers fled Devils Lake and Minot. The two cities' "Nigger Towns" were abandoned by the late 1930s.<sup>48</sup> Ward County's African American population dropped to thirty-four in 1940 after a high of sixty-eight in 1930. Ramsey County had only fifteen black people in 1940 and Grand Forks had even fewer, merely nine black residents from a high of sixty in 1910.<sup>49</sup>

One reason for the marked decrease in the African American population lay in the steady increase in the unemployment rate for black men between 1910 and 1940. The rate rose from eleven percent in 1910, when 309 black men held gainful employment, to seventeen percent in 1930, when 175 black men had jobs; then to a high of over twenty-one percent in 1940.<sup>50</sup> In that year, only fifty-two African American men retained gainful employment in all of North Dakota. By 1940 every black independent barber and shoeshiner had left the state. Only three wage laborers remained, with another fourteen men serving as either porters or janitors; this compared to a high of sixty-seven thirty years earlier.<sup>51</sup>

Although the plight of African Americans had turned bleak by 1940, in the earlier decades of the century the situation still appeared quite favorable. Indeed, a small number of African Americans gained sufficient respect that they held political offices or elected positions in their communities. John Sallee helped organize Norwich Township in McHenry County when he homesteaded there in 1902. He was interested in community affairs and served as chairman of the

township board for five years.<sup>52</sup> Nonpartisan League Governor Lynn J. Frazier appointed Tony Thompson as "private messenger to the Governor," a position Thompson occupied during the winter months throughout Frazier's term as governor (1917-1921).<sup>53</sup> Thompson also served as a deacon for the Grace Baptist Church, an African American congregation in Bismarck.

In a few areas of North Dakota during the first two decades of the twentieth century enough African Americans were present for black religious congregations to form. Black churches appeared in Bismarck, Minot, and Grand Forks, with services held for black parishioners in Fargo as well. In Minot services for African Americans were initially held at the First Baptist Church on First Avenue. However, in 1920 the congregation moved into its own building. As the *Minot Daily News* stated, "The colored people of Minot have purchased a house and lot on the corner of Third Street and Fifth Ave. for a church."<sup>54</sup> At that time the Reverend D. E. Beasley presided as pastor to the Second Baptist Church congregation. By 1928, Reverend W. E. Pool was pastor, holding afternoon services on Sundays.<sup>55</sup>

During the early 1920s in Grand Forks, African American parishioners worshipped at a small Baptist church on Second Avenue. Richard Lowe from Ohio presided over the church in 1920. However, a leader of the city's small African American community conducted the services sporadically throughout the latter 1920s because the meager congregation was unable to support its own Baptist minister. By 1926 the Grand Forks congregation, averaging only nine members, could no longer afford a building of its own in which to worship.<sup>56</sup> Thereafter, services were conducted either in the Baptist church or at parishioners' homes.

Bismarck's African Baptist Church served as much more than a weekly place of worship. It was, as the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* remarked, "a community organization of great value to the entire people of the south side."<sup>57</sup> The Grace Baptist Church originally met in private homes until the membership increased to the point where a building could be purchased and a minister secured from St. Paul. This church served as a social center for Bismarck's small African American population as well as a gathering place for rallies, dinners, and fund-raising activities for the entire run-down south side of the city.<sup>58</sup>

Although North Dakota's black churches tried to serve as social centers for their African American communities, the fact that so few black people lived in the state forced their membership to interact with white people for their social and economic livelihood. Unlike the neighboring states of South Dakota and Minnesota, North Dakota's residents did not organize a chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) or form service centers for their fellow African Americans.<sup>59</sup> The small and unstable black communities of North Dakota failed to create any institutions beyond the few black churches to meet their needs and gain cohesion and autonomy. Rather, most African Americans either kept to themselves or participated socially in interracial groups.

Interracial activities in which black people engaged included religious gatherings, parties, state and county fairs, and athletic events. For example, Ella Bryant was a member of the Baptist church in Page Township for over fifty years. Her brother Ralph and half-brother Charles Evans joined whites in celebrating at the town's Gala Days celebrations throughout the early 1900s.<sup>60</sup> Era Bell Thompson remembered her father hosting an interracial party for his Nonpartisan League co-workers at which Governor Frazier appeared: "For some it was their maiden trip across the tracks. . . for nearly all of them, the first time in a negro home."<sup>61</sup>

A small number of African American men and women participated in interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics in North Dakota between the 1890s and 1940. As early as 1899 a black man named James Duty played on the football team while attending the University of North Dakota. Although he did not graduate, Duty was the first African American enrolled at the university.<sup>62</sup> Era Bell Thompson found success on the track both in high school and at the University of North Dakota. While at Bismarck High School, she competed in interscholastic sprinting events and won twice at the state meet in Fargo. In one season at the University of North Dakota, Thompson broke five state records in the hurdles, broad jump, and sprinting events. She also tied two national intercollegiate records in the fifty yard dash and the broad jump. Further, she was named the University of North Dakota's "most representative co-ed in track" in 1927 even though she was the only African American at the school.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps the most famous athlete in the history of University of North Dakota was Frederick D. "Fritz" Pollard, Jr. He played on the university football team from 1935 to 1939, and was nominated to the all-conference team for three successive years. He also was proficient in track events, establishing new conference records in the high hurdles. Pollard represented the United States in hurdling events at the 1936 Berlin Olympics where he earned a bronze medal. *The Dakotah*, the University of North Dakota yearbook, referred to an *Oakland Tribune* article that named Pollard "The Best Negro Hurdler in History."<sup>64</sup> In 1939 he and Horace Johnson, who also excelled in football, track, and basketball, were the first black students to graduate from the University of North Dakota.

African Americans participated in athletic activities beyond the scholastic level during the first fifty years of statehood. Throughout the Great Plains and North Dakota, community baseball teams were very popular during the entire period under study. Almost any town that could find nine players fielded a team and black men played on some of these town teams since before the turn of the century. Bish Dorsey, who settled in Grand Forks in the early 1890s, played left field with the city's "Rivals" in 1898. That year the Grand Forks team won the championship of Northern Minnesota and North Dakota by default.<sup>65</sup> Other black farm hands or laborers played on community teams as well.

In fact, some African Americans travelled to North Dakota as members of community baseball teams. Before World War II many local teams commonly hired baseball players from outside of their community to strengthen the team

and raise town pride. Townships as small as Brismade, York, and Northwood boasted all-salaried teams shortly after the turn of the century. Among these players there appeared many African Americans. A 1902 photograph of York's baseball team features two black players. Similarly, another Benson County town, Brismade, had a black player named Bill Drake on the team in 1916.<sup>66</sup> This man may have been the same Bill "Plunk" Drake who later played for the All-Nations team and the Kansas City Monarchs of the renowned Negro National League.

Although African Americans played on interracial baseball teams throughout the early part of the century, North Dakota towns began actively recruiting black players from the Negro Leagues beginning in the 1930s. After Crookston, Minnesota recruited Negro League stars such as Chet Brewer in 1931, North Dakota teams followed suit.<sup>67</sup> In 1933 the owner of the Jamestown team imported two pitchers and a catcher from the Negro Leagues. Throughout the 1930s Valley City and Bismarck could also afford Negro League stars, while other teams hired good African American players for their teams.

The most famous interracial team to participate in North Dakota was the Bismarck team of 1935, which included such famous African American baseball players as Leroy "Satchel" Paige, Quincy Troupe, Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, and Hilton Smith. Paige received \$300.00 per month to pitch for the Bismarck team plus a new Chrysler automobile from Neil Churchill, team manager, car salesman, and Bismarck's mayor. Except for the black pitchers, catcher and first baseman, the rest of the team was white. As Paige stated, "We had a Jewish second baseman, a Lithuanian shortstop, an Italian third baseman, a Swede center fielder, a German in right, and an Irishman in left."<sup>68</sup> The Bismarck team won 96 of the 104 games they played that year and took home \$2,500 for first place at the National Semipro Tournament in Wichita, Kansas.<sup>69</sup>

None of the African American baseball players remained in North Dakota after the 1930s. Indeed, very few black people stayed in the state. Notable exceptions include William Sallee and Jack Mayfield. John Sallee and his son William hold the distinction as being the longest lasting African American farmers in state history. John Sallee came from Missouri and bought a relinquishment on 160 acres in April 1902. He and his son slowly purchased neighboring land until their holdings amounted to about a section.<sup>70</sup> John Sallee did all of his plowing himself rather than hire a gang plow because he did not want to overextend himself as so many black and white farmers did at the time. By 1982 the *Minot Daily News* stated that William Sallee "has been called North Dakota's only black farmer."<sup>71</sup>

Jack Mayfield first travelled to Grand Forks with a minstrel show in 1912. By 1930, he had settled in the city, working as a masseur for the University of North Dakota football and basketball teams. He served the Grand Forks Elk Club as masseur for 34 years, until his retirement at age 89. The *Grand Forks Herald* stated in 1978 that "Mayfield for many years was the only black man in the city." He remained active in the Grand Forks community until his death in 1986 at age 106.<sup>72</sup>

Despite these two long-time black citizens and a few other life-long residents of North Dakota, the state held little promise for African Americans in 1940. As farm laborers in the country and as day laborers and holders of personal service positions in towns and cities, African Americans were notably expendable in a bad economy. This situation was dramatized by the exodus of African Americans during the Depression. Black people abandoned North Dakota during the 1930s in search of better opportunities, or at least more social services, in urban states with larger African American populations. The possibilities that drew black people to the state before World War I failed to materialize as a small, weak, and unstable community of African Americans crumbled under the pressure brought about by a combination of drought and depression.

#### NOTES

1. For general information on the four all-black regiments after the Civil War, see William Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: a Narrative of the Negro Cavalry in the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West: 1869-1891* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1971); and John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1971).
2. Dakota Territory, Special Census (1885), Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm: Morton County.
3. Fowler, 50.
4. United States General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Medical Histories of Posts in Dakota Territory, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm edition, 1972, series #844, Reel #2: Fort Buford, 1891-1895; United States General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Returns from United States Military Posts, 1800-1916, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm series #845, Reel #159: Fort Buford 1891-1895; and Ronald P. Warner, "Fort Buford: Sentinel on the Northern Plains, 1866-1895," Master's Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1986: 189-90.
5. Medical Histories; and Ben Innes, *A Chronological Record of Events at the Missouri-Yellowstone Confluence Area from 1805 to 1896 and A Record of Interments at the Fort Buford Dakota Territory Post Cemetery, 1866-1895*, (Williston: Fort Buford 6th Infantry Regiment Ass'n., 1971), 33-34. Innes lists five African American servicemen interred at the post cemetery. The medical histories note the deaths of eight black enlisted men from illness or accident from 1891-1895. The remaining three deceased were buried in Williston.
6. Medical Histories.
7. Medical Histories.
8. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People's Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 567; and Scott C. Roper, "Race, Gender, and Baseball on the Northern Plains, 1900-1935," (unpublished paper for History of the West, University of North Dakota, 1992), 4.
9. United States Department of Interior, Works Progress Administration, Historical Data Project: Pioneer Biography Files, North Dakota, Williams County: George Newton, June 5, 1939. (Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library,

University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm reel #1119, original in Bismarck: North Dakota Heritage Center): 5.

10. Medical Histories; and Innes, 33-34.

11. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, April 18, 1895, 3.

12. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, April 23, 1895, 3.

13. Warner, 172-73.

14. *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, September 19, 1894, 4; C. M. Hartwick, "Obituary for Blakely Durant," in *The (Fargo) Record*, December 1895, 8; see also Clement Lounsbury, *Early History of North Dakota* (Washington: Liberty Press, 1919), 510-12.

15. Grand Folks Heritage Book Committee, *Grand Forks Heritage Book* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1976), 508. Little was found on McGregor (also written as Gregory) except census and land tract records and an article in the *Mandan News* on May 21, 1909, page 1, which declared him "a unique personality among homesteaders . . . a colored man and a veteran of the Civil War."

16. Page Community, *Our Page, 1882-1957* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1958), 92, 123; and United States Department of Commerce and Industry, Bureau of the Census, Special Schedules of the Eleventh Census (1890), Enumeration of Union Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of the Civil War: North Dakota, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm reel #59, Bundle #124 (Original in Washington: National Archives and Record Service, 1948).

17. United States Department of the Interior, General Land Office, Tract Books: North Dakota, Cass County: Township 143, Range 54, Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm reel #846: Roll #19, Volume #61 (Original in Billings, MT: Bureau of Land Management.)

18. Janet Sharp Hermann, *The Pursuit of a Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 42.

19. Hermann, 220; Aurene Kragness, *The History of Eagle Township* (Wahpeton: Riehlend County Historical Society, 1978), 2-3; and Hiram Drache, *Challenge of the Prairie: Life and Times of Red River Pioneers* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1970), 200-1.

20. Kragness, 3; and *The Daily Argus* (Fargo-Moorhead), September 23, 1884, 2.

21. *The Daily Argus*, September 23, 1884, 2.

22. Thomas Newgard and William Sherman, "Blacks," in William Sherman, et al eds., *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1986), 383; and Elaine Lindgren, *Land in her Own Name: Women as Homesteaders in North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1991), 23. Lindgren cites Thomas Newgard's Study of African American homesteaders in North Dakota. Three of the black women to file for homestead claims were members of an attempted colony of African Americans in Moline Township, McKenzie County between 1906 and the early 1920s.

23. *Hettinger County Herald*, June 19, 1924, 1, and January 26, 1928, 1; Dakota Territorial Census (1885): Burleigh County: George Aberle, "John Tyler," in Slope Saga Committee, *Slope Saga* (Amidon, ND: Slope Saga committee, 1976), 1114-16; and United States Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth and Thirteenth Censuses of the United States (1900 and 1910), Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm: Burleigh and Morton Counties.

24. Census, Thirteenth Census (1910), microfilm: North Dakota.

25. Census, Thirteenth Census (1910), microfilm: Williams County. Burt Lee, his wife Grace and brother-in-law Charles Finley were listed twice on the enumeration sheets, both in Missouri Ridge Township and in Williston, where they rented a house with Grace's father Christopher Finley, an odd job laborer.
26. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negro Population in the United States, 1790-1915* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1918), 662. The reader must be aware of the discrepancies discovered between the census tabulation books such as this and the actual census enumeration sheets. The enumeration sheets display a sizable margin of error, especially in the rural counties of North Dakota. I therefore utilize the tabulation books with reservation.
27. Tract Books: North Dakota, microfilm roll #33, Volume #105: Burleigh County, Township 139, Range, 75; Census, Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Censuses (1900-1920), microfilm: North Dakota; and Era Bell Thompson, *American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 72-73, 77-78.
28. Tract Books: North Dakota, microfilm roll #41, Volume #130: McLean County, Township 144, Range 82; Sheila Robinson, ed., *McLean County Heritage: McLean County, North Dakota* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1978), 45; and Mary Anne Barnes Williams, *Fifty Pioneer Mothers of McLean County, North Dakota* (Washburn, ND: Privately Printed, 1932), 51-52.
29. Census, *Negro Population*, 515, 607.
30. Census, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Censuses (1910 and 1920), microfilm: North Dakota.
31. United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States, 1920-1932* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), 583, 593, 597, and 660-61; and United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Agriculture, Volume 1, Part 2, Statistics for Counties* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 378.
32. Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 660-661.
33. Census, *Sixteenth Census: 1940, Agriculture*, 370; see also D. Jerome Tweton, "The Economic Crisis," in D. Jerome Tweton and Daniel F. Rylance, *The Years of Despair: North Dakota in the Depression* (Grand Forks: Oxheart Press, 1973), 1-16.
34. Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 621.
35. Census, *Negro Population*, 824; Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 787; Census, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Censuses (1910 and 1920), microfilm: North Dakota; and North Dakota State Census (1925), Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections, Chester Fritz Library, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, microfilm: Ramsey County.
36. Census, Thirteenth Census (1910) microfilm: Cass County.
37. Census, *Negro Population*, 522.
38. Nina Farley Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: a Story of McIntosh County* (Forth: The Ashley Tribune, 1941), 284.
39. Census, *Negro Population*, 522.
40. Census, Thirteenth Census (1910), microfilm: Cass County.
41. Lynn Severson, *Plum Valley Women: Minot's First One-Hundred Years* (Minot: Minot Commission on the Status of Women, 1985), 129.
42. Census, *Negro Population*, 519; Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 307; and Census, Thirteenth and Fourteenth Censuses. (1910 and 1920), microfilm: North Dakota.
43. Census, *Negro Population*, 519.
44. Census, Thirteenth Census (1910). microfilm: Grand Forks County.
45. Census, Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Censuses (1900-1920), microfilm: Burleigh, Cass, Grand Forks, Ramsey, and Ward Counties.

46. Newgard and Sherman, 385; *Mandan News*, July 16, 1909, 1; and W.P.A. Pioneer Biography files: Williams County, Henry Steil, April 8, 1938: 5. Steil commented on the lynching of a black laborer during the construction of a bridge in Mondak. It must be noted that African Americans were not involved with the construction of Minot's rail lines in 1900. The federal census of that year delineates dozens of Japanese workmen but no African American laborers. Black men were not employed by Minor's railroads until the tracks were completed.

47. *Minot Daily News*, September 8, 1920, 6.

48. W.P.A. Pioneer Biography Files: Ward County, William Might, undated. The interviewer wrote on the file, "He lives in 'Nigger Town,' or on the edge of it, and many places have been padlocked and the tenants ejected." See also Thomas Newgard, "Negroes in North Dakota," (Unpublished paper for Sociology of the Great Plains Seminar, North Dakota State University, Bismarck: North Dakota Heritage Center, undated), 14. Newgard states that in 1928 or 1929 the police told the black people of Devils Lake to leave and then the authorities burned the city's "Nigger Town" to the ground.

49. Census, *Negro Population*, 842-43; Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 786-88; and United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, Volume II, Part 5* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 450-52.

50. *Ibid.*; and United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Population, Volume III, The Labor Force, Part 4* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1943), 605-8.

51. Census, *Negro Population*, 519; and *Sixteenth Census, Labor Force* (1940), 605-8.

52. Carol Henke Brooks, *Granville: A Community Which Refuses to Die: First McHenry City Bicentennial City* (McHenry County Journal Register, 1976), 123; Corabelle Brown, *McHenry County: Its History and Its People* (Towner: Midwest Printing Company, 1985), 528; and Leonard Lund, "Homesteader's Sons Made Search for Family at 62," *Minot Daily News*, February 27, 1982, 12.

53. Thompson, 70-74; and Kathie Ryckman Anderson, "Era Bell Thompson: A North Dakota Daughter," *North Dakota History* 49: 4 (Fall 1982): 13.

54. *Minot Daily News*, August 21, 1920, 6.

55. *Minot Daily News*, August 21, 1920, 6, and April 7, 1928, 10.

56. Thompson, 175; Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 536-37; and Census, *Fourteenth Census* (1920), microfilm: Grand Forks County.

57. *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, November 24, 1920, 8.

58. *Ibid.*; and Thompson, 126.

59. David Basser Taylor, "The Blacks," in June Drennig Holmquist, ed., *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 82-83; and Sara L. Bernson and Robert J. Eggers, "Black People in South Dakota History," *South Dakota History* 7 (Summer 1976): 253.

60. *Our Page*, 170, 115.

61. Thompson, 130.

62. *The Dakotah, Volume One* (Grand Forks: Class of 1904; University of North Dakota, 1903), 171; and University of North Dakota Student Records; James Duty, 1899-1900, Registrar's Office, Twamley Hall, University of North Dakota, microfilm edition, 1974.

63. Thompson, 138, 140, 181-82; Anderson, 14; and Agdur Flaten, ed., *The 1928 Dakotah: Volume 14* (Grand Forks: Class of 1928, University of North Dakota, 1928), 247.

64. Jean Hoagland, ed., *The 1939 Dakotah: University of North Dakota* (Grand Forks: Class of 1939, University of North Dakota, 1939), 43, 163, 196.

65. *Grand Forks Herald*, October 8, 1898, 4; *Grand Forks Daily Plaindealer*, May 23, 1898, 4; *Grand Forks Weekly Plaindealer*, August 18, 1898, 4; and W.P.A. Pioneer Biography Files: Grand Forks County, Israel Foubert, July 1939, "Bish Dorsy" supplement.
66. Diamond Jubilee Book Committee, ed., *Seventy-five Years: Leeds, York, 1886-1961* (Privately Printed, 1961), 59.
67. Roper, 16-17.
68. Roper, 20; and Leroy "Satchel" Paige and Hal Lebovitz, *Pitchin' Man: Satchel Paige's Own Story* (Cleveland: Hal Lebovitz, 1948), 52.
69. Paige and Lebovitz, 53-54; *Fargo Forum*, August 29, 1935, 12.
70. Brooks, 122-24; Brown, 128; Lund, *Minot Daily News*, February 27, 1982, 12; Tract Books: North Dakota, microfilm roll #47, volume #152: McHenry County, Township 155, Range 80; and Thomas O. Nelson Company, *Atlas of McHenry County, North Dakota* (Fergus Falls, MN: Thomas O. Nelson Company, 1962), 30.
71. Lund, *Minot Daily News*, February 27, 1982, 12.
72. Marilyn Hagerty. "Black History Week," *Grand Forks Herald*, February 12, 1978, E1; Marilyn Hagerty, "Jack Mayfield," *Grand Forks Herald*, September 30, 1979, E1; and Celia Orelana-Rojas, "Jack Mayfield Dies at Age 106," *Grand Forks Herald*, June 8, 1986, A1, A6.

## PLAINS TALK

After the Civil War many blacks, seeking education and economic opportunities not available in the South, migrated to the Great Plains. In 1877 the Nicodemus Town Company purchased land near the south fork of the Solomon River. The land company bought the land from speculators who had obtained the property from the federal government. The first colony was established by 30 black settlers recruited from Topeka, where many Southern blacks congregated before continuing their journey further west. The first homes in Nicodemus were those built underground and the traditional soddies of the Great Plains. Later structures were made of native limestone or wood. When the railroad companies failed to run lines through Nicodemus, the dreams of great expansion were dashed. Slowly but surely the merchants and businesses left. Now Nicodemus is seeking federal assistance to preserve its artifacts and cultural heritage.

*Plains Talk is a series of sixty-second public service announcements for radio produced by the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University.*