



Oscar Micheaux
Photo courtesy Book Supply Company, New York

OSCAR MICHEAUX: AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELIST, FILM MAKER AND SOUTH DAKOTA HOMESTEADER

by **Betti C. VanEpps-Taylor**

African Americans who passed through or settled in South Dakota were a small, diverse group that left few lasting impressions on the state's homogenous white history. Yet for a brief period from 1905 to 1919, Gregory County, South Dakota nurtured the extraordinary talents of a black entrepreneur who affected popular culture for almost thirty years. Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) was a writer, pioneer film maker, and participant in the black renaissance. Two historic features influenced his career development: the precarious circumstance of black America, and the condition of society in Gregory County at the time of his arrival in 1905.

Micheaux grew up during a transitional period for African Americans. Some of the nearly four million freedmen benefitted from post-Civil War programs. Others struggled with poverty, bigotry, denial of franchise privileges, lack of access to education, and continuing oppression by a sharecropping system that replaced a legacy of slavery.

During their thirty year struggle to retain occupancy on small pieces of land, impoverished African American sharecroppers looked to a small group of leaders for guidance and inspiration. Booker T. Washington was the most influential African American in America at that time. In school rooms, his portrait hung beside those of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. Although black youngsters learned to revere the two white presidents, "Booker T" was one of their own. For them, he was the epitome of success. He had risen from poverty and slavery to build a great school and to become a power broker and adviser to presidents.

Betti VanEpps-Taylor has an M.A. in history from the University of South Dakota and has taught American history at Wayne State College in Wayne, Nebraska. Formerly a senior manager of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, she resides in Buhl, Idaho. Her full-length biography of Oscar Micheaux was published recently by Dakota West Books.

Had he not sat at table with President Theodore Roosevelt at a time when black people never ate with whites?¹

Surely, Booker T. Washington was the role model of Calvin and Belle Willingham Michaux (original spelling) while they raised their thirteen children, of whom Oscar was the fifth.² Calvin Michaux, once a slave in Kentucky, occupied a small farm on which he grew produce to sell in the nearby town of Murphysboro, some forty miles north of Cairo, Illinois. When their family reached school age, Calvin and Belle removed temporarily to Metropolis, a village on the Ohio River, with the best schools available to a "colored" population. Here an older sister received training as a teacher and Oscar received his basic education. Here he learned Washingtonian values of success through hard work, thrift, and economic ambition.

Financial problems forced the return of the family to the farm. Young Oscar never accepted the boredom of field work and, while laboring in the potato patch, pondered a more fulfilling destiny. With the counsel of Booker T. Washington in mind, he maneuvered his way into the job of selling the family's produce at a local market, and found salesmanship to his liking. Using his considerable charm, he easily persuaded local housewives to purchase additional produce to supplement items on their grocery lists.³

By the time he was seventeen, Oscar had saved a little money and become discontented with local black culture. He was intrigued by his older brother's reports of a prosperous life in Chicago. In 1901, armed with the arrogance of youth, he left home over the strenuous objections of his parents to seek his fortune there. On arrival, he was disgusted to find that his brother, who had written glowing accounts of a prosperous life, only moved from job to job while he courted favor with a widow to afford fancy clothing with room and board. Worse, his brother displayed no sense of urgency about saving money for the future. Oscar rented a place of his own and entered the school of hard knocks.⁴

By 1901, southern blacks had begun migrating to the Windy City. Its burgeoning economy offered them jobs in packing houses, warehouses, and coal companies, plus work in household service. In turn,

access to jobs and reasonable wages provided a sense of adventure and a chance to fashion new communities into an urban, mainstream of life. A newcomer could choose points of access, ranging from the gutter to the church.⁵

After a series of low paying jobs that offered little opportunity to build a savings account, Micheaux resolved to go into business for himself. Knowing that downtown competition would be fierce, Micheaux set up a shoeshine stand in a white, suburban barber shop, where soon he became a fixture. Here he listened to talk among men of affairs and learned about their business world. Eventually, discouraged at his inability to increase his earnings in that line of work, he secured a job as a porter for the Pullman Company.⁶ Although he worked as a porter for only two or three years, the experience he derived benefitted him for the remainder of his life.

As a porter, he traveled on passenger trains from coast to coast and observed first hand the customs and habits of white people. To be sure, the Pullman Company offered poor wages, but the work brought obvious benefits: travel, prestige, adventure, tips and, until the company stopped the practice, opportunities to make up for poor wages through collusion with conductors in skimming profits from fares collected in cash.⁷

Micheaux built his savings account by rendering extra services and pocketing tips. He learned business strategies from his customers and, sometimes on long hauls, encouraged bored or lonely businessmen to tell war stories and discuss business trends. As a porter, he learned to mingle easily with white people and to defer to their expectations without a loss of self-confidence. He also established a network of satisfied patrons who, in subsequent years, sought him out to employ his services on private excursions. As a personal porter, he traveled abroad and visited much of South America and Mexico. During layovers in metropolitan areas across the United States, he visited theaters, museums, and historical sites. In rural areas, he circulated among residents and learned about local cultures.

Ironically, the boy who could not wait to leave the farm found himself drawn again to a rural experience as the best opportunity for an

African American man to make his mark. Heeding Horace Greeley's famous dictum, "Go west, young man, and grow up with the country," he carefully saved money to buy land in the burgeoning West. Through casual inquiries and observations, he learned that Iowa was too expensive, and Idaho too dry. During those early years of the century, speculators agreed that the best opportunity was on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in south-central South Dakota. To investigate further, he wrote to federal offices in Washington, DC for information about the area. As a farmer's son, he knew what he wanted: deep black loam with clay subsoil, and a reasonable amount of rainfall.

Either good luck or the intervention of Providence was with Micheaux as he chose his location. Within half a decade, numerous places had opened for settlement by outsiders. The Sioux Agreement of 1889 had defined the boundaries of five reservations for Lakota and Yanktonais people west of the Missouri River. On each of these, federal employees persuaded tribal residents to surrender traditional communalism for landed capitalism in personal allotments. After the residents began to occupy their allotments, officials persuaded them to sell large unallotted acreages as "surplus" for cash to support their new family farming or ranch industries. From 1905 to 1916, opportunities for settlement on surplus acreages opened at remote areas on the Cheyenne River and Standing Rock reservations, at the west edge of the Lower Brule Reservation, on the southeast corner of the Pine Ridge Reservation, and on three locations at the east end of the Rosebud Reservation.

Any except the location that Micheaux chose either would have positioned him on land of little value for agriculture, or would have placed him in a cultural circumstance inhospitable to an immigrant black man. The opening in Gregory County was among the first; it came quickly under authority from an act of Congress approved on April 23, 1904 (33 Stat., 254).⁸ Gregory County was situated on area relinquished by a heterogeneous society of tribes more intermarried with outsiders than was any other in all of Lakota County. For one thing, the country contained the site of the Whetstone Agency where, prior to the year 1878, "accommodationists," tribal members who were willing to make a

measure of concession to the white settlers, had gathered near the Missouri River in segregation from Spotted Tail's larger following. In the Whetstone (Gregory County) group in 1873 lived 65 white men with Native American wives. The whites had come from England, Ireland, Sweden, France, Prussia, Mexico, and Canada. Some had lived there as long as 26 years. They raised 157 mixed-blood, multi-lingual, multi-cultural children. The Indian mothers mainly were followers of Swift Bear, whose group included some Cheyennes and some Oglalas. At the urging of federal officials, they farmed, accepted federal regulations, and accommodated intrusions by a great variety of outside influences.

Even the larger following of Spotted Tail, whose main band lived from 30 to 70 miles west of the Missouri River, was one of "international" Indian composition. Overall, the most numerous Upper Brules comprised no more than 45 percent of the population. Others were Miniconjous, Oglalas, Two Kettles, and an extraneous group called "Wazhazhes."

Gregory County was also home to Fort Randall which had accommodated U.S. Army personnel from 1856-1896. Missouri River forts often contained African American civilian personnel working as cooks, servants, or laborers, and in the early 1880s Fort Randall had briefly been home to the 25th Infantry, the famous African American "buffalo soldiers." Micheaux could not have found a group of greater ethnic complexity with more previous contact with blacks anywhere on the Great Plains.

The acceptance of his arrival by long-time residents was important to his success. Needless to say, his own experience with inter-cultural accommodation was equally significant. As the lone African American homesteader in Gregory County, Micheaux always knew that racial attitudes of outsiders who settled near him might not be as accepting. Nevertheless, Oscar Micheaux could not have discovered a cultural climate in an area opened to settlement better suited to accept the appearance of a lone black man. Surely, luck or Providence was on his side.⁹

By 1905 opportunities to homestead in the west were dwindling, so

Gregory County, South Dakota was opened by a lottery. Micheaux was present for the event. There were 2400 parcels of land available and 75,000 hopefuls in the lottery pool, who paid from \$2.50 to \$6.00 an acre for the coveted land. Micheaux was disappointed that his name was not among the 2400 lucky winners, but apparently he lost due to the odds and not because of racial discrimination.¹⁰

A year later, back on the railroad, he learned it was possible to purchase a Rosebud "relinquishment" [either an allotment up for sale by heirs of a deceased owner, or a farmstead abandoned after the lottery]. In *The Conquest*, he described his determination to purchase such a farm. Although he wrote the book as an autobiography, he wrote in the fashion of the period, disguising the people, including himself, and various places. Thus, when he wrote about the Little Crow, he referred to the Rosebud. "Orristown," where he filed his claim, was Bonesteel. His name in *The Conquest* was "Oscar Devereaux."

He described his arrival in a town filled with transients eager to buy "relinquishments," and crooks of every description waiting to exploit them. At first he had difficulty convincing land agents that he was serious. Finally, he found a livery owner and part-time land agent who agreed to take him to view prospective sites. En route, the agent confided that he had been called a fool for "wasting his time hauling a damn nigger around because he obviously had no money and was just stalling." Angrily Micheaux replied, "Show me what I want and I will produce the money."

He then described exactly what he was looking for and kept the agent going until they found it—a lovely fertile quarter-section near the little town of "Calais" [Dallas]. After buying the land, he returned to the railroad to replenish his finances. With cash in hand in the spring of 1905, he moved to his farmstead. He was twenty years old.¹¹

Reluctantly, Micheaux had learned to farm in Illinois, but now the project did not seem unpleasant. He was, after all, doing it his own way for himself. Like most Dakota greenhorns, he made his share of mistakes. His were in full view of local settlers, who had no idea what to make of him. They passed along their perceptions, some of which

reflected their prejudices, as family stories among early residents. Ignoring the fact that white homesteaders regularly engaged in land speculation, some alleged that his choice of land so close to town was blatantly opportunistic and speculative.¹²

Micheaux recounted an amusing, ongoing incident regarding his difficulty in obtaining good work horses. Before he finally found a satisfactory team, every crooked horse trader or horse thief in the area tried to cheat him [and there were many in the vicinity of Burke in Gregory County]. The most interesting aspect of this tale lay in his reaction, for he never failed to see humor in the situation. Each day he went out with a mismatched team and his breaking plow. People stopped to laugh while they watched his struggle.¹³

Micheaux watched his neighbors, too, and was struck by the diversity. They ranged from the Missouri spinster on the west to a "loud talking German" further north, and an English preacher near the German. A "big, fat, lazy barber who seemed to be taking the rest cure joined me on the east . . . the most uncompromisingly lazy man on the Little Crow." Also in the neighborhood were a merchant and a banker, and the others "of all vocations in life, of all nationalities except negroes, and I controlled the colored vote."¹⁴

He might have spent his life as a Dakota farmer had Micheaux not been disappointed in love. For some time he had unsuccessfully sought a wife. During the cold, lonely winters he read and wrote. He became friends with the daughter of a neighbor who shared his interest in literature. Soon he discovered to his horror that they were falling in love.¹⁵ Mixed marriages were common among Indians, but few took blacks as their spouses. Several black settlers in Dakota Territory either arrived with white wives, or subsequently married white women and apparently experienced general acceptance.¹⁶ For Micheaux, however, the Washingtonian principle of social separation seemed wise.¹⁷ He succeeded on the Rosebud by playing the game according to white standards. Later, old timers would say that he rarely sat at table with his white neighbors, although he loved the fresh baked goods pressed on him by neighboring farm wives who worried about this lonely bachelor.¹⁸

He knew that black men had been lynched for far less familiarity than what had developed between him and his young friend. Micheaux also thought about Frederick Douglass. His late-life second marriage to a white assistant seriously damaged his credibility among African Americans. In any event, Micheaux wondered how he could join such a marriage without losing his credibility among the people of his own race whom he hoped to influence by his example of entrepreneurship.¹⁹ How could he take a lively, young, white woman to visit in black Chicago or home to Great Bend, Kansas where his parents now lived? Quickly, before the ill-starred romance could progress very far, he traveled to Chicago to find a black wife.²⁰

He could hardly have chosen more poorly. "Orlean," the pseudonym he gave to his wife in *The Conquest*, was the pretty, sheltered daughter of a prominent elder, a preacher and official in the African American Methodist Church. A dominating and opinionated man, the elder adored his daughter. The outspoken Micheaux alienated him immediately, but the wedding took place, perhaps because the girl's father believed she was marrying a wealthy man. To be sure, the groom was not poor, but his assets, built on hard work, were heavily tied up in land investments. The two returned to the Rosebud, where they purchased an investment homestead in her name.

Soon the bride's father began to interfere. There was a series of escalating confrontations between Micheaux and his father-in-law. When the couple's newborn daughter died shortly after birth, Orlean's father arrived to take his daughter home with or without the husband's consent.²¹ Without Micheaux's knowledge, Orlean emptied their bank account. The preacher took his daughter home to Chicago, where he later sold the speculative property and pocketed the money. Repeated attempts by Micheaux at reconciliation failed, and the marriage ended in a divorce.²²

Back on the Rosebud, distraught at the failure of his marriage and haunted by the knowledge that he had been bested by a man he despised, Osear Micheaux brooded. Early experiences with his mother's "shouting Methodism" had soured him on organized religion, and his experience

with the Chicago elder hardened his views.²³ During the winter of 1912, he sat in his sod house and poured out his frustration into a disguised autobiography about a thwarted love affair and the engrossing tale of the settling of the Rosebud. Writing in an uneven style that occasionally sparkled with description and humor, he sketched people, politics, and circumstances typical of sod-house settlement on the arid Great Plains, creating a newly recognized homesteading classic.

When he finished, he realized he had a marketable product to recoup some financial losses. A woman in nearby Dixon typed the manuscript. He obtained fiscal advice from the wealthy Jackson brothers, who appear in his book as the "Nicholsons." As wealthy sons of an Iowa governor, they were movers and shakers in county politics.²⁴ To finance publication of his book, he sought subscriptions from neighbors and friends. The limited publication quickly sold out and was reprinted many times.²⁵

With his broken heart on the mend, Micheaux wrote, farmed, and struggled against the terrible drought, alongside his white neighbors whosaw him as a fellow homesteader—a bit odd, perhaps, "who happened to be colored." Some resented him because he "thought he was just as good as a white man," or because he was "prideful and arrogant." Still, neighbors generally conceded that one had to be a bit odd to survive in a sod house on the unforgiving Great Plains.²⁶ Eventually, like many of them, he succumbed to hard times, selling out or losing his lands to foreclosure. Writing would prove his economic salvation.

By 1919, Micheaux had written three books of fiction and in Sioux City created his own "publishing house"—The Western Book and Supply Company—to print his books. He sold them himself in Chicago and out across the Midwest and South. Two of his early books, *The Forged Note*, and *The Homesteader*, were semi-autobiographical. They included fantasy that recounted his painful experience with love and his abiding hatred of his former father-in-law.

His books also reflected a continued belief that certain aspects of black culture were holding the race back. One was the black church, which he held responsible for creating power-hungry, dishonest, hypocritical, sexually promiscuous preachers like his former father-in-

law. He castigated the sheep-like behavior of members in congregations who tolerated, supported and participated in such behavior. He criticized aspects of black urban society with its array of half-educated, "semi-civilized" ex-slaves who seemed unwilling or unable to recognize opportunities. He deplored the harsh reality of urban life with its racism, violence, lack of opportunity, and black-on-black crime, and contrasted these problems with the more suitable, inter-ethnic cultural climate he had found in Gregory County. He remained unable to understand why fellow African Americans did not flock to his Utopia in the West. These views earned him a reputation among some black people as being prideful, arrogant, and "uppity."²⁷

By accident, Oscar Micheaux became a film maker in 1918. African American entrepreneurs had been experimenting with developing a genre of films that portrayed their cultural experience without the persistent stereotyping that characterized white-owned films. One firm, the Lincoln Film Company, had been especially successful and was actively seeking family-oriented stories that would appeal to African American audiences. One of the partners had read Micheaux's *The Homesteader* and approached him for the film rights. Although he liked the idea that his novel would become a film, Micheaux was unwilling to surrender artistic control, even though he knew nothing about film production. When the principals could not agree, Micheaux broke off negotiations and made the film himself. Subscriptions to support his infant film company came from frontier and urban midwestern friends, neighbors, and other investors who, in an aggregate, contributed \$15,000 to produce an eight-reel, silent film. It opened in 1919 in Chicago to good reviews among African Americans and was later enjoyed by his former neighbors on the Rosebud.²⁸ With that success behind him, he left farming for good and entered the film business.

Over the next thirty years, Oscar Micheaux produced some forty-three black-cast movies that were widely distributed in the United States and Europe. Operating from Chicago and New York City, he wrote, cast, directed, and produced his films on a limited budget, doing much of the work himself. He attracted first-class talent, including Paul Robeson,

who made his film debut in *Body and Soul*, in 1924; and Robert Earl Jones, father of James Earl Jones, who starred in *Lying Lips*, in 1939. He was known as a star maker, developing the career of Lorenzo Tucker, the "black Valentino," and several leading ladies. He made the technical transition from silent films to "talkies" with ease.

Micheaux distributed his films using a technique called "bicycling," which involved taking a current film and an option for another scheduled for release the following year to theater owners and offering them a "deal" if they leased both items with immediate payment. This allowed him to raise capital in advance of production. Although he never surrendered artistic control, his second wife, Alice Russell, gave up an acting career to manage the business. Always under-capitalized, the firm struggled to assimilate expensive and expanding new film technology. The better organized Hollywood studios had placed a heavy competitive burden on all the independents, especially black film makers whose markets were limited.

Faced with bankruptcy in the late twenties, Micheaux placed his assets temporarily in his wife's name and reorganized the company with money from white investors. This reorganization allowed him to make his first sound film, *The Exile*, which appeared in 1932.

Known around the Harlem as "Mr. Micheaux, The Film Maker," he understood the value of an image. He appeared on the scene in his custom-tailored suits, overcoats, and Russian fur hats. By his mid-thirties, his tall, athletic frame had bulked up to a well-proportioned, well-dressed three hundred pounds. Because he never learned to drive an automobile, he traveled in a chauffeur-driven, black limousine.²⁹

Although his films and books had a considerable, popular following among African Americans in the segregated south, the ghettos of the eastern seaboard, and several European countries, they were not universally admired. Literacy critics panned his books as repetitious and poorly written, playing to racial stereotype; and they received little positive attention from the Harlem intelligentsia.³⁰

Film critics compared his modest operation unfavorably with the Hollywood dream factories. Micheaux lacked the financing and technical

ability to create special effects or spectacular scenes. He depended on good stories, which he often wrote himself. Each film took about ten days to shoot and cost ten to twelve thousand dollars in production. Critics discounted their value as second-rate, underground productions, comparable to Hollywood "C" pictures. Micheaux defended his films as valuable antidotes to the popular Hollywood propaganda that negatively portrayed African Americans. He believed that black people wanted good stories that portrayed the culture in all of its variety as well as social, political, and economic conditions. He also wanted to promote the potential for progress that he believed lay in the emergence of a strong, black, middle class. Some of his films were protest films; others simply told a good story. His insistence on using only black talent provided work for African American actors and actresses at a time when jobs were scarce.³¹

Criticism from the black press and literati was frequent and must have been painful, inasmuch as Micheaux characterized himself as "a great race man." Never considered as politically correct or polished as work produced by the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, his books and films received little critical appreciation. It was a time when other gifted black writers produced work that reflected the reality of black urban life and often glorified the stereotypical underclass: thugs, prostitutes, pimps, con men, or dope pushers, while they themselves, struggled for middle class status and recognition. For Micheaux, the proper image was one of a well-educated, prosperous, moral, black middle class strongly motivated to achieve success and retain a strong cultural African American identity. His view of the potential for acculturation and upward mobility was wider and broader than most.³²

With the coming of desegregation and widespread black access to the mainstream world, Hollywood began to improve its portrayal of African Americans. In the face of this competition, Micheaux's work faded to the shadows of cinematography. During the 1980s film historians, intent on salvaging the industry's archives, rediscovered black-produced, black-cast films as a genre worthy of study. Lack of preservation had taken a toll on all film archives, and the Micheaux films

were no exception. Most copies of his films had disappeared. Ironically, the few that have been found often were discovered in other parts of the world, and included sub-titles in Spanish or French. Gradually, film historians and technicians are collecting, remastering, and distributing his work to audiences through organizations such as the Smithsonian Institution and the Oscar Micheaux Society, a group of film scholars headquartered at the University of North Carolina.³³

Still, Micheaux remains an enigma. After his death in 1951, his widow went into seclusion, sealed or destroyed his personal papers, and gave no interviews. As the quest for black equality continued, Micheaux's Washingtonian principles and ideology of personal independence and self-sufficiency were discarded in favor of cultural survival, and the uniqueness of the Micheaux persona was lost. Today, however, African American film producers including Spike Lee and Bill Cosby have refocused on Micheaux's contributions to film creation and story telling.

Other African American scholars are newly recognizing his successful entrepreneurship during a time when virtually every economic door was closed to African Americans. This entrepreneurship included his phenomenal output: seven books and at least forty-three films over a thirty-year career, all of which were self-produced and self-marketed. White midwesterners who may never see a Micheaux film are gradually becoming aware of the universality of experience encompassed in the life of Osear Micheaux. They learn first-hand about homesteading from Micheaux's *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. When they visit his re-created homestead perched atop a hill just south of Highway 18 between Burke and Gregory, South Dakota, gaze out across the unending plains and hear the wind howl around the primitive buildings, they touch their own roots.

Chester Fontenot remarked that Micheaux's "creation of the black pioneer as an individual who was able to collapse the difference between race and class" and achieve success in an unfamiliar environment was his most important contribution to black literature and films.³⁴ Like others who struggled with the unforgiving prairie and earved homes in the

wilderness, he had experienced the exhilaration of a different kind of freedom and success. This color-blind struggle was, in a sense, a test for Booker T. Washington's philosophy of hard work, self-help, and independence. In this self-defining adventure, Micheaux caught a vision of an opportunity that could free and elevate his people. Those who have lived on the Great Plains can understand this vision of freedom and opportunity and are not surprised that Micheaux's critics, white or black, who have not had this experience cannot understand his quests or his achievements.

Oscar Micheaux is buried near his family in Great Bend, Kansas. A headstone, placed in a recognition ceremony in 1988 reads,

Oscar Micheaux
1884-1951
A Man Ahead of His Time

NOTES

1. The Washingtonian philosophy was an important subtle cultural influence for many black people even while it was being challenged by an emerging black leadership under W.E.B. DuBois in the early decade of the twentieth century. Discussion of this phenomenon appears in virtually every African American history. This writer used Emma Lou Thornborough's *Booker T. Washington*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969) which scholars consider the most authoritative. Micheaux also discusses Washington's effect on his life in *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), and Learthen Dorsey, who wrote the introduction for this edition of *The Conquest* also discusses the effect of the Washingtonian philosophy on black people of the period.
2. A discussion of Micheaux's parents, along with the original spelling of the name as Michaux, appear in several biographical sketches. One of the most complete is Randal Woodland's "Oscar Micheaux." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 50: African American Writers Before the Harlem Renaissance*. (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Company, 1986), 218-215.
3. The primary source of information about Oscar Micheaux, a very private man in later life, is found in his autobiographical *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. On his death, his widow went into seclusion, gave no interviews, and researchers have had limited success in locating any private papers or records. To produce a comprehensive, well-balanced biography, considerable research in primary documents of the period, as well as investigations into the oral history of remaining family members, remain to be accomplished. This information, added to the critical analyses of his books and films now in process, will complete a comprehensive portrait

of Oscar Micheaux. This paper relies on the autobiography for its narrative line, recognizing that one's self-perception is often quite different from the perceptions of others. The preceding portion was taken from Chapter I of *The Conquest*.

4. Micheaux, Chapter II, 18-23.

5. Arlene Elder, "Oscar Micheaux: The Melting Pot on the Plains," *The Old Northwest: A Journal of Regional Life and Letters*. Vol. 2, No. 3 (September 1976): 299-307, 304.

6. Micheaux, Chapter IV, 34-37.

7. In Chapters V and VII of *The Conquest*, Micheaux describes life on the road from an insider's point of view. For a scholarly account of the Pullman porters and their struggle for labor equality, refer to William H. Harris. *Keeping The Faith*. (Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1977.)

8. Readers with curiosities about how Gregory County became a place opened to settlement by outsiders will be interested in this information. Rosebud Agency took shape at its permanent location in 1878, without specific jurisdictional boundaries on the Great Sioux Reservation. Rosebud Reservation appeared under authority from the Sioux Agreement of 1889 as the largest ever established in Sioux Country, comprising 3,228,161 acres spread across five counties in southwestern South Dakota.

For more than a decade, the Rosebud census remained in a state of flux. In 1886, it was reported at 7,656, but by 1892 it dropped to 4,254. The decline resulted partly from voluntary movement by groups among the six new Lakota and Yanktonai reservations. In addition, more than 600 from the Rosebud jurisdiction were taken as prisoners of war after Wounded Knee, and involuntarily enrolled at Pine Ridge, while voluntarily others made the move. Rosebud lost as many as 900 this way, but in 1898 added 442 Lower Brules in the Big Whit River District.

Thereafter, the census became more stable—at 4,917 in 1901, and at 5,516 by 1923. Approximately 5,000 reservation residents owned in common about 645 acres per capita.

After the year 1900, they began to accept allotments, and they leased as many as 49 scattered, tribally-owned "pastures" to outside cattlemen for cash. In 1901, U.S. Inspector James McLaughlin persuaded them to sell acreages left over after allotment, too, for funds to help with adjustments to family farming and ranching, and to elevate the value of their new allotments as real estate through regional economic growth.

They assented to three land sales: one in Gregory County, authorized by an act of Congress dated April 23, 1904 (33 Stat., 254); one in Tripp County, authorized on March 2, 1907 (34 Stat., 1229); another in Melleite and Washabaugh counties thereafter.

On September 14, 1901, an agreement to sell 416,000 acres in Gregory County at \$2.50 per acre (twice the amount charged by the United States for most public land) bore the signatures or marks of 1,031 voting adults. [Council with Rosebud by Inspector James McLaughlin, April 13, McLaughlin to Secretary of the Interior, October 5, 1901, Irregular Sized Papers, #106, National Archives.] Gregory County contained 521,050.24 acres, of which Indian residents had taken 104,909 with the best agricultural qualities in 452 allotments. Officials reserved small acreages for missions, a school, and a sub-agency to assure the continuation of federal services.

A report for the year 1921 indicated this disposition of payment received for 416,000 acres. The total paid in annual per capita amounts through the year 1905-1913 was \$1,285,437.19. The amount used for the purchase of cattle in the years 1907-1909 was \$248,302.64. The sum used for administration was \$21,745.89. The balance in an interest bearing account in 1921 was \$6,232.81. [Assistant Commissioner E. B. Meritt to Mr. Buffalo Bear, April 6, 1922, Indian Central Classified File, #211, National Archives.]

By December 31, 1910, a similar sale in Tripp County placed in two interest-bearing accounts a total of \$1,298,460.16. From this amount, \$1,000,000 went into an account for use in per capita payments. [Acting Indian Commissioner to Secretary of the Interior, April 11, 1907, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Second Assistant Commissioner C. F. Hauke to Superintendent John B. Woods, March 30, 1911, Indian Central Classified File #220, National Archives.]

The Mellette-Washabaugh land opening was similar to these. The land rush that brought Oscar Micheaux to Gregory County came through the exercise of persuasive pressure by Inspector McLaughlin and the Rosebud Superintendent, to be sure, but it took place with approval by most adults in search of funds to develop farms and ranches on allotments.

9. Annual Reports, August 20, 1869, August 29, 1870, Spotted Tail Agency, National Archive - Kansas City; Special Commissioner's Edward C. Kimble and Henry E. Alvord to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 16, 1873, M234, roll 252, National Archives; William A. Dougherty to George D. Ruggles, April 23, 1880, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, National Archives; "Background Data on Indians at the Rosebud Reservations," October 1, 1953, Record Group 75, Accession No. 75A457, Box 63085, National Archive - Denver.

10. One of the more perplexing issues involving Indian allotments and African Americans is an allotment involving a "colored man" named Blair. A white man legally married into the Rosebud Tribe and accepted as a member was eligible for an allotment in his own name until 1897. Blair might have been excluded from an allotment because his union with Mrs. Lottie Gordon (a full blood woman whose Indian name translated "Stinking Foot") was not legalized, and because he was never accepted as a member of the tribe. Yet the matter of his race became an issue for two reasons. One was his refusal to give up his home while allotment went on around him. Another was the application of his son. As a person half black and half Indian, the younger Blair attended the Indian boarding school at Genoa, Nebraska. As solutions to these problems, the allotting agent allowed the elder Blair to remain at his home to remove crops for the 1893 season, then forced his eviction by assigning the acreage he had occupied as an allotment for Eugene Little; and allowed the half black/half Indian son, who lived with his mother at Ponca Creek, to take an allotment of his own at a location other than the site occupied by his father. These solutions came through the recognition of rules that applied to white men. Yet they called attention to the extraordinary scrutiny used to deal with this African American, and to the reluctance of tribal leaders to "incorporate" the black man Blair into the tribe. The Blair case is explained in Allotting Agent George C. Crager to Indian Commissioner, November 8, 1893 (#42296) and August 10, 1894 (#30999) in Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, NA.

11. Micheaux, Chapter VII. The details of his purchase are discussed on pages 61-65. Translations for Micheaux's disguised people and locations are well-known in Gregory County. In an August 18, 1996 interview with Jack Broome, Principal of Burke High School, Burke, SD, Broome identified all of the people and places mentioned in *The Conquest* for the writer. This information can also be found in local histories, one of which is Adeline S. Gnirk's *The Saga of Ponca Land*. (Gregory, SD: Gregory Times Advocate, 1979), 19.

12. Some of these incidents are recounted in the county histories, including the above-mentioned *Saga of Ponca Land*. Others were recounted at the First Annual Oscar Micheaux Film Festival, held August 17-19, 1996 in Gregory, South Dakota. Janis Hebert's article, "Oscar Micheaux: A Black Pioneer," *South Dakota Review*, 10 (Winter 1973), 63-69, 64, cites correspondence by Don Coonen with University of South Dakota professor John Milton that repeats a prevailing view that Micheaux's railroad experience gave him an inside track with respect to the future route of the

railroad. Further research and verification among these sources is required if the understanding of the Micheaux persona is to be balanced.

13. Micheaux, Chapter XXVII, 168-174.

14. Ibid. Chapter X and XI, 74-80.

15. Ibid. Chapter XV.

16. Betti C. VanEpps. *Sable Pioneers: The African American Experience in South Dakota, 1802-1920*. Unpublished work in progress containing original research into cross-racial marriages in Dakota Territory and the trans-Missouri upper midwest. (1996-97).

17. Micheaux, Chapter XXVII, 168-174.

18. University of South Dakota Oral History Library. Interview #871 by Steve Plummer on July 27, 1973 with Dick Siler, Rosebud pioneer, homesteader, and Micheaux neighbor.

19. Micheaux, Chapter XXVII, 168-74.

20. Ibid. Research indicates that Micheaux's wife was Orlean McCracken, daughter of African Methodist Church official, Elder N.J. McCracken of Chicago. Micheaux's marriage announcement, and a later report on his domestic troubles appeared in *The Chicago Defender* (April 24, 1910 and April 29, 1911). The marriage was quietly dissolved in early 1912.

21. This story is told in Chapter XXXVII of *The Conquest*. However, Gregory County historian, Lee Arlie Barry, who has spent some thirty years studying Osear Micheaux's Rosebud experience, and is herself a lifelong Gregory County resident, has been unable to document or prove the existence of the dead infant. Given the sketchy requirements for maintenance of vital statistics of the time, the lack of a record in itself proves nothing. (Interview by the writer with Ms. Barry, August 17-19, 1996 at First Annual Oscar Micheaux Festival Gregory, SD.)

22. Ibid. Micheaux, Chapters XXXVIII to XLIII, 251-311.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid. Chapter XXXIII, 208-215.

25. Ibid.

26. First Annual Osear Micheaux Festival, Gregory, SD, August 17-19, 1996. Roundtable and community discussion held at Dixon Hall and observed by the writer.

27. Chester J. Fontenot, Jr. "Oscar Micheaux, Black Novelist and the Film Maker." *Vision and Refuge: Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains*. Edited by Virginia Faulkner with Frederick C. Luebke. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 109-125. Also, Micheaux, Chapters XXII, 142-147; XXXVII, 251-264, XXXVIII, 265-279. Other critics, including Elder, Woodland, Dorsey, Cripps, and Heber, previously cited, agree that Micheaux's views on race issues reflect the racial atmosphere and culture of the period which included stereotyping, blaming the victim, and unconscious racism mixed with racism that assuredly was conscious and intentional.

28. Woodland, 219.

29. Micheaux's books, film business, films, film stars, persona, and business methods are discussed in detail in my full-length biography of Micheaux, Chapters 7-10 and in many of the cited sources, including Reid, Elder, Woodland, Cripps, Hebert, Fontenot, and Dorsey.

30. Critics of Micheaux's time either ignored his books or dismissed them as not worthy of review. Later critics have followed suit. David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem Was In Vogue* dismisses the Micheaux novels as "curious folk novels." (Introduction). Critic Carl Milton Hughes described one of his later books: "he cannot rid himself of the idea of a scenario writer and his books always bear the mark of sensationalism. His most recent books show the influence of pulp and detective periodicals. He attempts to be a serious writer, but he hardly has the

creative imagination and misses the reality of things by his theatrical posturing..." *The Negro Novelist, A Discussion of the Writings of American Negro Novelists, 1940-1950*. (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), 132-133. An unpublished dissertation by Joseph I. Young entitled "Oscar Micheaux's Novels: Black Apologies for White Oppression," (University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska 1984) reflects the view prevalent in the 1980s that Micheaux's work is inherently racist in its reflection of the accommodationist beliefs common in African American society during the early decades of this century.

31. Fontenot, 117-120.

32. Ibid.

33. Interest in Micheaux and his work is spreading beyond that of film or black history. In Gregory County, a high school teacher uses *The Conquest* to teach students their homesteading heritage. Using Micheaux's description of his homestead, the Gregory County Historical Society recently replicated it on the original site and hosted the first annual three-day film festival in his honor in August 1996. In 1995 a group of great-grandchildren of the Gregory County homesteaders formed the Gregory County Oscar Micheaux Society and launched an annual festival in his honor. Now in its fourth year, it is drawing a cosmopolitan and nation-wide collection of Micheaux scholars who come to experience Micheaux's homestead days. In 2000 Great Bend, Kansas plans a Micheaux Festival honoring him as the son of early Great Bend settlers.

34. Fontenot, 123.