

The Dearest Field Transcript

Underwriting: *Lost Highways*, from History Colorado, is made possible by the Sturm Family Foundation, proud supporters of the humanities and the power of storytelling, for more than twenty years.

[Audio clip from *Black Panther*, ship descending through invisible shield into Wakanda]

Noel: In the summer of 2018, Marvel released the much-anticipated superhero movie *Black Panther*.

[Clip of *Black Panther* movie audio, lab scene in Wakanda]

Shuri: I have great things to show you, brother. Here are your communication devices for Korea. Unlimited range, also equipped with audio surveillance system. Check these out.

[Clip fades out]

Tyler: If you haven't seen it, *Black Panther* tells the story of Wakanda, a hyper-advanced technological utopia hidden in the heart of Africa, led by a superhero, King T'Challa.

Noel: Though the afro-futurist vision in *Black Panther* is fictional, the very idea of this self-determined, all-black utopian society clearly struck a chord.

Tyler: It was a huge hit around the world, and in 2018, it was the top grossing film worldwide.

Noel: Almost 2 years later, it still ranks as the 10th highest grossing film of all time.

Tyler: Clearly, there is a huge demand for stories about powerful and complicated characters of color. As the writer Jamil Smith said in an essay published in *Time Magazine* when the movie came out, [QUOTE] “Relating to characters onscreen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us.” [UNQUOTE]

Noel: On some level, the invisible world of Wakanda is a powerful metaphor for hidden and overlooked black stories.

Tyler: We came across one of those stories right here in Colorado. It’s about a different kind of hidden, all-Black utopia founded in the West in the aftermath of the Civil War.

[Lost Highways music fades in]

Noel: And a small portion of it is still alive today.

Tyler: From History Colorado Studios, this is *Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains*. I’m Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I’m Noel Black. In this episode, we bring you the story of Dearfield, an all-Black settlement on the North-Eastern Colorado plains.

Tyler: It was one of dozens of settlements scattered throughout the West and midWest founded by former slaves and their descendants.

Noel: These were towns where African-Americans either homesteaded or bought their own land, grew their own food, made their own culture, and tried to live as freely as they could in the country that couldn't have been built without their slave labor.

Tyler: Our story begins with a hammer.

Julie Peterson: The Hammer itself is actually pretty uninteresting. But what makes it interesting is the story behind it. If you're looking at the hammer...

Tyler: This is historian Julie Peterson. She helped curate an exhibit called *Zoom-In: The Centennial State in 100 Objects*, which is on display here at History Colorado in Denver.

Noel: The hammer is one of those 100 objects chosen to help tell the story of our state.

Julie Peterson: What I find interesting is that one of the curators of the past actually wrote onto the object itself in plain sight: "C. Rothwell; Dearfield, Colorado; black cowboy". So, Dearfield is unique in that it was founded by and for African-Americans.

Charles Rothwell Oral History: (slowly, with many pauses) Dearfield Colorado. The only colored or Negro, settlement, in the state of Colorado. And there was a lot of us homesteaded.

Well... anyway, they've all lost all their places but me I'm the only one alive now, that homestead is there.

Tyler: That was Charles Rothwell, the owner of the hammer that Julie was talking about, in an oral history from the mid-1970s.

Noel: Rothwell was one of the last residents of Dearfield (spelled D.E.A.R. - and we'll get to that).

Tyler: Homesteading was incredibly difficult for all settlers, even in the best of circumstances, and all-Black settlements faced even bigger challenges.

Noel: And like so many homesteads and western towns, most of the all-Black settlements eventually disappeared. All except one.

[Ambient of driving on road]

Stephanie Daniel: It is Friday June 28th and this is... my audio diary. I'm in the car driving east on Interstate 70 from Denver, Colorado to Nicodemus, Kansas. I'm almost there and I'm really excited to see the town.

Noel: This is reporter Stephanie Daniel. She works for public radio station KUNC in Greeley, Colorado. Nicodemus is about 350 miles east of Denver.

Tyler: Stephanie's great great grandfather was a freed slave who moved West in the aftermath of the Civil War. We asked her to help us report this story from a personal perspective. And we'll hear from her and the residents of Nicodemus throughout the story.

Stephanie Daniel: So I'm really excited to see Nicodemus because it's just going to give me a glimpse into, not only the freed slaves that founded Nicodemus, but also my ancestors and how they were living when they migrated west and... Yeah, staked their claim on some land and just started a whole new life after - after slavery ended. And...

[ambient of movement inside car]

Stephanie Daniel: We're here. Nicodemus National Historic Site Visitor Center.

[Laughing]

Lucrecea Horne: Welcome to Nicodemus National Historic Site. The only remaining African-American town west of the Mississippi that is still in existence.

Stephanie Daniel: Alright, So what's your name?

Lucrecea Horne: My name is Lucrecea.

Tyler: This is Lucrecea Horne, a resident and descendant of the original founders of Nicodemus.

Lucrecea Horne: ... and we were landowners and so we were not going to give up our land. And that's why from 1877 until now there have always been people that lived in Nicodemus. They just weren't... they... they were determined to make it work and nothing was gonna stop us.

Stephanie Daniel: And I'm assuming that there were attempts to buy the land from my ancestors and the people that settled here or there.

Lucrecea Horne: I really don't know the specifics but I know - so, on the town site it is still all owned by family members. Family members still all own everything on the town site. But the township...

[Music fades in]

Noel: For better and worse, the West has been a symbol of freedom and self-determination since the beginnings of the republic.

Tyler: Many Black people found freedom in the West long before 1877, and long before the Civil War, says George Junne, Professor of Africana Studies at the University of Northern Colorado.

Dr. George Junne: Some of them were fur trappers and so forth. Others were escaping slavery. Some were living with the Indians and so with the Crow Indian Reservation in Montana,

there are stories about black people coming through there. They didn't set up communities as much as they were hunting, trapping, and so forth.

Tyler: Kansas, in particular, was a popular destination for slaves fleeing the south.

Noel: As with other western states like California, Washington, and Oregon, KANSAS had already abolished slavery before The Civil War began.

Tyler: The emancipation proclamation TECHNICALLY freed slaves from Confederate states in 1863. And the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ABOLISHED slavery in 1865, but it wasn't until the 14th Amendment was ratified in 1868 that black people began to move west in large numbers.

Noel: The Fourteenth Amendment was the hugely controversial Constitutional amendment that all of the former Confederate states had to ratify after the Civil War to rejoin the Union and regain representation in Congress.

Tyler: It guaranteed freed slaves and ALL people born on American soil full citizenship:

[Old West music fades in]

Voice Actor: "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the

United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”

[Old West music fades out]

Tyler: Now that Black people were citizens it meant that technically, they could ALSO own property.

Noel: For many former slaves, land ownership was the very definition of freedom, just as it has always been for so many colonists and immigrants. And as new citizens, black people were now entitled to take advantage of the Homestead Act: which granted any citizen who hadn't taken up arms against the government 160 acres of land.

Tyler: But owning property in the South had proved almost impossible.

Noel: So they turned west.

Tyler: With more and more American Indians being forced onto reservations, new lands were opened up to homesteads. All you had to do was stake a claim, improve it, live on it for five years, and it was legally yours.

Noel: Jake Friefeld, a research fellow at the Center for Great Plains Studies at the University of Nebraska, says that the promise of owning their own land was a huge part of what drew freed slaves west.

Jake Friefeld: We think that maybe if you count the families of those who succeeded and failed at homesteading, twenty six thousand black Americans moved into the Great Plains over the course of the homesteading period.

Noel: The first mass migration of African Americans to the west began in the late 1860s and continued through the 1870s.

Tyler: These pioneering emigrants became known as EXODUSTERS.

Dr. George Junne: You know of the exo-exoduster movement and of course from the Bible book, Exodus, it happened primarily after the Civil War and many blacks wanted to leave the south and go someplace else because they've been enslaved there. And then after the Civil War stuff, the U.S. Southerners tried to re-establish slavery in some form or fashion, and so, they were looking for other places to go to.

Noel: Some of them were also lured by speculators and entrepreneurs with clever marketing schemes. Some got scammed by promises of freedom in the form of cheap plots of land in newly-formed townships.

Tyler: But despite the fact that the land often had no water, and poor soil, the homesteaders came anyway.

Dr. George Junne: You have black people wanting to own their own homes, own their own farms and to take care of themselves in their community. And so they would go to places like Nicodemus, Kansas and other places around the country, and they were looking for places that they could be physically safe, could educate their young ones, and so forth. In fact, do what most other Americans wanted to do, and that's - that's what was going on.

[Old West music]

Noel: In Nicodemus, for as little as \$5 dollars, former slaves were promised rich farm land and freedom from discrimination and Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Here's Angela Bates. She's the Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society. She told Stephanie Daniel that Nicodemus was started by a white town speculator and a black homesteader. When they started recruiting people to move to Nicodemus, they focused their efforts on Kentucky.

Angela Bates: So they organized a town, named it Nicodemus after one of the African slaves that purchased his freedom in the United States, not after the Biblical Nicodemus but after the slave called Nicodemus who talked about a better time coming. And they said: Come out, settle in an all black town, you don't have to deal with the Jim Crow laws, the prejudice, and discrimination, just come here. And so if you want to come, it'll cost you five dollars to join the Nicodemus town company.

[Old West Music]

Tyler: For many, that “better time” seemed *A LONG WAY OFF* when they first arrived in Kansas, both figuratively and literally. Black settlements were often miles away from the nearest train stop, an example of the lengths people were willing to go to in order to build a place to call home.

Noel: Not to mention that later on, when many of these towns TRIED to get the railroads to come, they were often circumvented.

Angela Bates: You got off the train then they still had a two day walk over to Nicodemus. Yeah. Then once they got here, some of the people that had come out from Pico which was a little small group that had come out that spring, they were living in dugouts, and so some of the people that showed up were like, Oh my God, they're living in dugouts, holes on the ground. (laughter) I can't imagine that though really living in those underground and when they were former slaves in Kentucky at least they lived in cabins. But when they got out here, this was a prairie, and there was no trees. It was the shock of coming from Kentucky where there's, you know, lush trees and the whole environment is just different coming out here and then having to live in holes in the ground. So some of those people in that second group literally turned around and went back to...

[Old western music continues]

Tyler: But the harsh conditions and arid land didn't stop the founders of settlements like Dearfield and Nicodemus. It was little to endure compared to the oppression they'd experienced in the south.

[Music fades out]

Noel: And some staked their own 160 acre claims outside the town site. Here's Lucresea Horne in Nicodemus again:

Lucresea Horne: The thing that still gives me goose bumps that I love talking about is the Homestead Act. So they were really promoting that out here in Kansas. And so my people, I can go back to my great great great great aunt who, through the Homestead Act got her land. And so these folks are I believe about 13,15 years removed for slavery and she's a black woman and she's a homesteader and she has 160 acres. How awesome is that? How awesome is that?

[Music fades in, then out]

Noel: Again, OWNING LAND and working it, whether it was buying a parcel in a township or staking a hundred and sixty acre claim under the Homestead Act, was seen by many as the greatest LONG TERM guarantee of freedom and rights.

Tyler: Decades after the Exodusters founded all Black towns like Nicodemus, a man named Booker T. Washington would inspire another generation of African Americans to stake claims and work the land.

Noel: Washington was a former slave who went on to found The Tuskegee Institute, an all black college devoted to teaching vocational skills to black people. He also wrote the highly influential autobiography *Up From Slavery*. Here's George Junne again.

Dr. George Junne: Booker T. Washington is a very controversial person for a lot of reasons. However, one of the more positive aspects was he told African-Americans: Own your own houses, own your own land, and that was a sign of freedom, to have money in your pocket, and to be able to essentially tell anybody, get off my land, because it's mine.

Noel: But Washington's ideas, and the whole notion of land ownership, had also come under attack from Black intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois.

Tyler: Du Bois believed that EDUCATION and ACTIVISM were far more important guarantees of long term freedom than land ownership or vocational skills.

Dr. George Junne: Washington would have said that black people should not go for civil rights, human rights. At some point in time white people recognize how great black people are and give them rights. And DuBois said nobody's going to give you - people don't give up power, and that's ridiculous. And the other part was education, because Washington said that black people should learn how to do work with their hands, do carpentry, and everything like that. And Tuskegee, where he was head of, when you went there you worked in building the buildings and you know how to do the windows, the doors, the chimneys, there's nothing wrong with that.

However, he said that that's what black people should do and don't get into the arts and languages of philosophy and math and everything like that.

Noel: And at the turn of the 20th Century, Washington's ideas inspired thousands of Black homesteaders to found dozens of towns and settlements throughout the west. Towns like Empire, Wyoming; Blackdom, New Mexico; and Dearfield, Colorado.

[Old west music fades in, then out to underwriting]

Underwriting: Support for History Colorado comes from the Coors Brewing Company. Coors is proud to sponsor "Beer Here: Brewing the New West", now on view at the History Colorado Center in Denver. The exhibition features artifacts and insights that reveal why Coloradans today enjoy 360 breweries and counting. More than just a tale of Ale, "Beer Here" is a story of Colorado, told over a few beers.

[Old west music fades in then fades into Tyler narrating]

Tyler: Even if you're looking for it, Dearfield is easy to miss. It's out in the mostly flat, mostly agricultural land northeast of Denver by about an hour.

Noel: There's not much left of the former all-Black settlement to see from Colorado Highway 34. There's a boarded up filling station, a fenced-off lunchroom that's now falling into the ground, the shell of an old blacksmith's shop, and a small granite marker recently erected to commemorate the site.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: Well you're looking at the remnants, obviously of - this was, this is Dearfield, the founding town for the colony.

Tyler: This is Bob Brunswig. He's an emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the University of Northern Colorado, and he says he's become obsessed with the Dearfield site in his retirement.

Noel: And he'd have to be obsessed. It's blazing hot out here in mid-June, even with the wind blowing.

Tyler: And it'll be even hotter when he comes back later this summer to excavate the site of another collapsed home that's been swallowed by a grove of thorny trees in an empty field farther back from the road.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: The colony ultimately had over 5000 acres of farmland. About, I would guess, about 70 or 80 percent of it was homesteaded. This is one of the last places for homesteading early in the 20th century.

Noel: We talk in the shade of a vandalized garage full of old mattresses, and we walk through the weeds and rogue wheat stalks past the chain-link fence that surrounds the old lunch room.

Tyler: Dr. Brunswig tells us the Dearfield site is in *amazing* shape compared to what's left of most of the other all-Black settlements. And that's thanks in part to The Black American West Museum here in Denver, which now owns these buildings.

Noel: But right now it feels like MORE than a ghost town - like the ghosts themselves haven't left.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: We're on the very edge of the colony on the north - northwest corner of it. The colony and this town were founded by Jackson. O.T. Jackson. Oliver Toussaint Jackson.

Noel: Brunswig points to what's left of a brick chimney at the back of the crumpled lunchroom building.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: Uh, where that chimney is located is where the founder of the site spent the - the last, oh, about seven or eight years of his life. So it's kind of a memorial to him. He died in 1948.

[Old west music fades in]

Noel: Largely self-educated, ambitious, and a believer in the virtue of hard work, O.T. Jackson was tall, sharply dressed, and had a mind for business. He was also unafraid to step on a few toes to realize his goals.

Tyler: Even when those goals alienated him from the Black community.

Noel: Here are Peggy Ford Waldo, Historian and Development Curator at the Greeley History Museum, and Professor George Junne describing Dearfiled founder Oliver Toussaint Jackson's early life:

Peggy Ford Waldo: He was born to Hesehia and Caroline Jackson, former slaves. He was born in Ohio in April of 1862 and was educated in Ohio.

Dr. George Junne: O.T. Jackson was an entrepreneur from the beginning.

Peggy Ford Waldo: When he was 14 years old, he became, I would say, rather independent. He began by 1876 working in restaurants in the Cleveland, Ohio area. Then eventually becomes a caterer, he was associated with a number of restaurants including a restaurant called The Vendome.

[Old West music fades in]

Tyler: By the late 1880s, OT Jackson had heard stories of African Americans settling and traveling in the west.

Noel: And Like so many before him, he saw opportunity there.

Peggy Ford Waldo: In the 1890's he finds himself in Boulder Colorado.

Dr. George Junne: and he worked at - for - at the Chautauqua building in Boulder and he was in charge of all of the people that worked at the Chautauqua building and he was always looking for some way to make money.

Tyler: Then, in 1895, while Jackson was catering in Boulder, Booker T. Washington gave his famous Atlanta Compromise address.

Tyler: The speech was widely covered in newspapers across the country, including many in Colorado. In it, Washington implored black Americans to “cast down your buckets where you are,” and lift themselves up through manual labor and hard work without waiting for or demanding respect from white people.

Noel: In his address Washington said, quote, “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem”. It was an incredibly deferential stance toward race relations at a time of extreme racial tension and continued lynchings, especially in the south. And again, Booker T. Washington believed that whites would eventually *give* black people the respect and rights they deserved, but once they had demonstrated the virtue of their self-reliant work ethic.

Tyler: After years of working in the restaurant and service industry, Jackson took up the plough himself in 1896 and bought a resort farm called Valmont, just outside of Boulder.

Noel: And he learned to farm A LITTLE. But catering to weekend visitors was still his bread and butter. Here’s historian Margaret Picher:

[Music fades in]

Margaret Picher: Valmont was a place where you went when you wanted to drink; which of course everybody did.

Tyler: He marketed the farm and its lakes as a picnic and recreation area. He held dances, and he sold alcohol.

Dr. George Junne: and that was his first effort to do something that we would say would resemble Dearfield, but it didn't make it.

Noel: In 1907, Boulder and a handful of other communities on Colorado's front range banned the sale of alcohol.

Margaret Picher: Prohibition was coming in and Boulder particularly was a nice town. They wanted to be more genteel.

Noel: Farming alone wouldn't pay the bills, and O.T. Jackson was forced to sell Valmont.

Tyler: But Jackson was already working on another idea for a different kind of community.

Noel: He had read *Up From Slavery*, Booker T. Washington's autobiography, after it was published in 1901.

Tyler: In the book, Washington uses his own life to illustrate his belief in vocational education, hard work, land ownership, and black self-determination as the way forward.

Peggy Ford Waldo: One thing that Washington promoted was sort of a back to the land movement. So in 1906, Jackson would later write that he became very interested in starting an African-American farming colony with about 200 people. But he didn't quite know how to do it.

Noel: But he needed something more than land or a single farm to achieve his vision. He needed more connections, more power.

Tyler: So he turned to what he DID know from his years in the newspaper and service industry: SALES and PROMOTION.

Noel: But this time he applied his skills in the political arena.

Tyler: In 1908, Jackson used his business and social connections to round up 100 Black votes to help elect John Shafroth as the governor of Colorado. Even though the Democratic Party was the party of the KKK IN THE SOUTH at the time, Shafroth was a Progressive Democrat.

Noel: Among other things, Progressive Democrats in the West were pushing for things like women's suffrage, direct democracy, the eight-hour workday, and prohibition. Nevertheless, many in the growing Black community in Denver and Boulder saw Jackson's betrayal of the party of Lincoln as a self-serving, politically expedient way to cozy up to power for his own personal interests.

Tyler: Beatrice Rainey was a resident of Dearfield, and in this oral history, she expressed an especially harsh opinion of O.T. Jackson.

Beatrice Rainey Oral History: He wanted to be a big shot. And he - he didn't have too much personality. But he was the kind of a person that if he could sell you something and make something off it, he would. It was what HE could get out of it. And he was an Uncle Tom. Yes, that's what he was.

[Music fades in]

Tyler: But O.T. Jackson saw himself as a pragmatist. If working with white people meant he could advance himself and his race, then he was eager to work hard and do what was necessary. And his work for Shafroth paid off.

[Music fades out]

Peggy Ford Waldo: And for those services rendered, Shafroth appointed Jackson as his messenger in the governor's office. And so this was a door of opportunity that opened to Jackson who had always been somewhat of an entrepreneur and who moved easily between both the white and black social circles.

Noel: It was a position of honor. It required great trust from the governor, and enormous discretion on Jackson's part.

Tyler: And in return for his service, Jackson got exactly what he was hoping for.

Peggy Ford Waldo: and Jackson was able to secure Governor Shafroth's help in taking advantage of the enlarged Homestead act of 1909, which allowed individuals to apply for up to 320 acres of land in the more marginalized areas for homesteading.

Dr. George Junne: So he was able to use that and parlay some of that into getting the land that was homesteaded in what we called Dearfield.

[Music fades in]

Noel: On June 7, 1909, Oliver Toussaint Jackson had sent a letter to the editor of the *Boulder Daily Camera*, in which he wrote:

Voice Actor: "No doubt you are fully aware of the fact that almost every door of opportunity for the employment of negroes is fast closing on us, and soon we shall be necessitated to eke out an existence through our own channels. It has been said that the negro has been freed and a citizen long enough to establish great religious and educational institutions, and now it is time for him to create some industrial and productive insitutions, to furnish employment for his own race.... We cannot hope to survive as a race by depending upon other races to give us and our children employment always. We must create and give employment to our own; we must be producers as well as consumers. It has been well said that the best possession on earth is the earth itself. And we therefore have as our object the acquiring of a tract of land of sufficient number of acres to plat a farming district and townsite to be owned and controlled solely by negroes..."

Tyler: The following year, on May 5th, 1910, Governor John Shafroth helped O.T. Jackson secure a 320 acre plot of land in the Platte River Valley, where he could start a small agricultural settlement exclusively for Black people.

Noel: One of the early settlers, Dr. J.H.P. Westbrook, suggested the name DEARfield, spelled D.E.A.R.field, because QUOTE “the land was to be very dear to the hearts of the settlers.”

[Music fades in to underwriting]

Underwriting: Support for History Colorado comes from Colorado State University. CSU embraces the critical role that History Colorado plays in preserving and telling the stories of our state and the West. As Colorado’s land grant university, CSU is proud to be a partner in programming and outreach state wide. As they celebrate 150 years of education, research, and service, CSU remains committed to preserving the past, and creating a brighter future. Learn more at COLOstate.edu

[Music fades in then out to Tyler narrating]

Noel: Back in Nicodemus, Stephanie Daniel talked to resident and historian Karla Adams about the early days of the town and settlement.

[Ambient: crickets chirping]

Stephanie Daniel: So do you - have you heard any stories about like when they first came, when the first residents came and they settled the town just, kind of, what they saw, or their thoughts?

Karla Adams: Well, uh, probably the most which is a really popular quote - they're out at a mound four or five miles south of here. And, you know, so they're that close to Nicodemus and they're looking out, you know, and her husband, the people are saying "there's Nicodemus" and she's looking, and she's wanting to know well where is it? I don't see a town, there's nothing out there but fields. And so he says "you see the smoke coming out of the ground? That's Nicodemus". And, you know, so, they're living in dugouts. She was seeing the smoke from the dugout, and so it was disappointing in fact it says that she began to cry. So, um, yeah. They weren't coming out here. The scenery wasn't what they were told, what they had been promised, and so, for some it was discouraging. Yeah. So, (laughs) but, they stayed. The Hickmans, they stayed, and lived here in the area. And so they - they made it work but it wasn't at all what they expected, initially, again, disappointing.

Noel: Though Dearfield was founded more than 30 years AFTER Nicodemus in 1910, the first year was just as difficult.

Tyler: Bob Brunswig told us that, just like Nicodemus, the first settlers at Dearfield were forced to live in dugouts.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: And there were just a handful of people that did dugouts, you see that little rise over there. There's a canal right behind it. That's where they did some dugouts and put some canvases over the top, and froze their tails off during the wintertime.

Noel: Charles Rothwell was just 15 when he and his mother arrived in Dearfield in March, 1911. He describes it in this oral history from the Denver Public Library.

[Charles Rothwell Oral History Clip]

Charles Rothwell: So when we got to Dearfield that morning there was an awful blizzard. They had an aw- the worst blizzard they had there in several years.

Margaret Picher: What month of the year that?

Charles Rothwell: That was in March. That was early part of March. And so we cooked on a stove there in an old boxcar with our horses, our hogs, guineas, chickens...

[Clip fades out]

[Music fades in]

Dr. George Junne: But what that shows you is that - that's how - that's what people were willing to put up with to own their own lands or own their own farms.

[Music fades out]

Noel: Professor George Junne.

Dr. George Junne: And I think three of the six horses froze to death that winter. But, it was a very difficult first winter, but the people stuck it out.

Tyler: Despite that harsh first winter, Jackson and the handful of early settlers at Dearfield remained optimistic and they set to working the land the following year.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: But the problem was that when the black people came here all of the water rights had been bought up. So they had no irrigation. They couldn't buy a piece of land with any kind of irrigation rights or anything on it.

Tyler: Some potential settlers and investors suspected that Governor Shafroth had only helped Jackson secure that land because of how little water it had.

Beatrice Rainey Oral History: And they gave him this plot of ground up there that nobody else wanted. And it seems to be kind of like in the center of all good places, to see, and the other lands were taken of course when we moved up there already.

Noel: Beatrice Rainey remembers having to haul water from the Platte River almost a mile away.

Beatrice Rainey Oral History: Because we carried, when we first moved up there on the ranch, we carried water in barrels on the back of a wagon. We carried water and barrels up to the house first to use.

Tyler: And food was just as scarce.

Beatrice Rainey Oral History: We had fried potatoes for breakfast. We had boiled potatoes for lunch. (Laughter) We had some more boiled potatoes for dinner.

Noel: But where farming was concerned, Colorado at the time was in a wet cycle. And the rains were enough to irrigate the fields.

Dr. George Junne: So when he started out in 1910 the rainfall was - was all you needed for the most part. And they had bumper crops of everything they planted.

Tyler: Before long, more than a hundred people had settled on the 160 acre Dearfield townsite and in the 8000 acres of land in the surrounding colony. Houses and schools went up, churches got built, and the town came to life.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: This building with the roof kind of collapsed behind us across the road is a blacksmith's shop. That place is where he worked. He was the auto mechanic. You know, he worked on horse - did horses, did farm equipment and stuff like that. And he was the town musician. So he and his brother in law who lived with him. He played the fiddle and his brother in law played the mandolin and they played at dances all the way around here, there was a dancehall, small dancehall here.

Noel: This is Dr. Brunswig talking about a Dearfield resident named Squire Brockman

Dr. Bob Brunswig: He would play the fiddle and they would have square dances and things like this. And he was kind of a shy guy. He was really kind of funny because they're - the very

little information that we have of people talking about him is that he was quiet but he was a great musician.

Tyler: Adding to the prosperity of Dearfield in its first years, World War One drove commodity prices through the roof.

Noel: But even with the almost-immediate agricultural successes, few settlers could make a living at Dearfield.

Tyler: After some initial hostility, the residents of Dearfield built relationships with their white neighbors, and were able to find extra work.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: And in order to make a living a lot of these black farmers got together and they bought farm equipment and they were doing harvesting for the farmers in the area, and they provided a lot of services. They did some farm labor, crop labor, and things like this for the established white farms. And so, you know, the barriers were obviously still there, but they began to break down to two very large degree.

Noel: Many others continued to commute back and forth to Denver during the week.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: That's pretty much a pioneer thing. You know, in the West, period. Where a lot of the men worked - worked away from their farms because they just couldn't - couldn't make a living that way. So they - their family stayed there and they did a lot of the work and everything and the women took charge. This was a very strong women's community.

Noel: This, says Brunswig, is an often overlooked aspect of Western American history.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: But basically the American West in many places was built by the women. Because they were the backbone. It wasn't that the men weren't contributing. It's just that in many cases the men, they had to provide that supplemental support to keep everything alive.

[Old West music fades in]

Tyler: O.T. Jackson was no different. As Charles Rothwell noted in his Oral History with Margaret Picher, Jackson kept his job in Denver while he promoted and developed Dearfield.

Charles Rothwell Oral History: And he served under four different governors in the state capital at that time. O. T. Jackson did.

Tyler: And even when he WAS in Dearfield, Beatrice Rainey told Margaret Picher in another Oral History that Jackson was always more of a businessman.

[Beatrice Rainey Oral History Clip]

Beatrice Rainey: but he didn't even farm up there. He didn't even have a farm or anything up there.

Margaret Picher: He just ran businesses in town

Beatrice Rainey: and that's all he did. He had that store and that - and that - the filling station you know that's all he did.

[End of clip]

Noel: As a seasoned promoter, Jackson also knew he could leverage his position at the capital to attract new residents and investors. And he needed all the help he could get.

Tyler: Despite the fact that Dearfield is only 73 miles northeast of Denver, most of the would-be settlers had little or no money. But OT remained determined to welcome everyone.

Noel: Here's an excerpt from a 1915 *Western Farm Life* article by O.T. Jackson in which he recalled Dearfield's early days:

Voice Actor: "The new settlers at Dearfield were as poor as people could be when they took up their homesteads. Some while filed on their claims did not have money enough to ship their household goods or pay their railroad fare. Some of them paid their fare as far as they could and walked the balance of the way to Dearfield."

Tyler: But once they got off the train, which was 5 miles away, many got lost. So Jackson began to hire LOCATORS.

Voice Actor: "I began by making a charge of \$14 to each locator for locating them, but I soon changed this and made no charge for locating. I was able to get assistance from the Union Pacific people, who gave passes. I had my teams haul them out from Masters station to look at the land, gave lodging and meals free at my cabin and in some cases loaned all or part of the money to pay the filing fees."

Noel: Due in no small part to O.T. Jackson's sheer determination, Dearfield continued to grow and prosper.

Tyler: By the end of 1917, there were 500 residents. Land values skyrocketed. and prices for crops and livestock remained high as World War I dragged on.

Noel: Jackson's belief in Dearfield as the realization of Booker T. Washington's vision for all-black farming utopias is clear in articles and promotional materials from the time.

Tyler: Here he is quoted in a Denver Post article about Dearfield in late 1917:

Voice Actor: "This is merely a movement to promote the welfare of the negroes and place them on a higher plane. Our settlement includes only hard working, honest persons, who are willing to do their share of the work if they can reap their reward in the form of a substantial living for themselves and their families.

Noel: And in a promotional letter sent out to newspapers across the country, Jackson wrote:

Voice Actor: "Dear Sirs: WE ARE BUILDING THE TOWN OF DEARFIELD IN COLORADO and we solicit your cooperation to establish a municipality owned and controlled by colored people so that we can control, govern and administer as a part of the state government the same as other people... We are soliciting all real honest to goodness race loving people to join in some way to build up the Dearfield community."

[Old West music fades in]

Tyler: Despite the bumpy start, Dearfield enjoyed 10 straight years of growth.

Noel: In 1921, the population of Dearfield townsite and the surrounding colony had reached 700.

Tyler: But over the next 10 years, a series of economic, cultural, and natural disasters would nearly erase Dearfield and its legacy.

[Music gets louder, then fades out]

Noel: As with his earlier venture at Valmont, the forces that would ultimately erode O.T. Jackson's dream of Black self-determination at Dearfield were almost entirely beyond his control.

Tyler: It began in late 1918 at the end of World War I when commodity prices crashed. Here's George Junne again.

Dr. George Junne: After World War One is over with the prices bottom out of wheat and other kinds of things, because it's not - it's not needed for the war effort. So. So a lot of farms were under right after World War One because of that.

Noel: And there was another problem Jackson couldn't possibly have foreseen when young African American troops began to return from the war.

[Clip of 1919 song "How You Gonna Keep Em Down on the Farm"]

Dr. George Junne: there is an old song that came out around World War One. How can you keep them down on the farm after they've seen Paree. Well, some of the guys that came back, they don't want to be stuck on a little farm. They wanted something bigger, because they've seen Paris, which is a little bit of an upper scale than Greeley or some of the surrounding communities. So, they went to other places and that kind of drained some of the population right after the war, with people going elsewhere.

Noel: Then came the vagaries of the weather. Here's Peggy Ford Waldo again:

Peggy Ford Waldo: The reason that Dearfield though, became successful as an African-American colony was because we were in one of Colorado's proverbial wet cycles. There's the wet and drought cycles in the wet years even marginalized lands, dry lands, can be very productive. But when you go into a drought period and if you don't have access to irrigation, your crops don't come to fruition.

[Music fades in and fades out]

Noel: During Dearfield's first decade, Colorado had been at the tail end of one of its wet cycles. It coincided with the war years and the high price of crops. But a long period of lower than average rainfall soon followed.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: And then by the early 1920s as it began to dry up - it just doesn't grow a whole lot on dry land.

Tyler: This is Bob Brunswig again. He said the soil in Dearfield didn't help either, and that the townsite is actually built on top of ancient sand dunes.

Dr. Bob Brunswig: And that was another factor is that they didn't have the kind of soils that would retain the moisture.

Dr. George Junne: And then when the dust bowl comes in in the late 1920s, all these little communities on the eastern plains, they just blow away.

Noel: Here's Beatrice Rainey in her Oral History:

Beatrice Rainey Oral History: You see how the weeds? It's just dry and scrubby. And there's just the sage brush grows on there, all the time. And that's all that is, is just sandy. And by the time you - time you plant in a place two years you've got nothing but sand. And when that wind blows all that sand just cut you to pieces.

[Old West music fades in then out]

Noel: By the 1940s, there were only *four* residents left. Most of the hopeful colonists had moved to Denver.

Tyler: Two of those people were the Grove brothers. They lived in one of OT Jackson's buildings with their father.

Dr. George Junne: And Jackson decided what he was going to do is try to start things all over again. So he hired the father to do some plowing and with him - with the plow that was pulled by either horses or mules - the plow broke away. And there's these great big tines on the thing. He got tangled up and the tines went through his chest and he died a few weeks or a couple of months later. And that was Jackson's last effort. He just gave up pretty much after that.

Noel: The following is from an oral history with Walker Groves. He remembers O.T. Jackson when he, his brother, and his father moved to Dearfield in the final years.

Walker Groves Oral History: Very impressive man. A tall stately, businessfied man. I never did see him when he wasn't dressed up. Never. He impressed me as being a black man and had money.

Tyler: In the oral history, Groves explained how he came to respect Jackson while growing up in Dearfield.

Walker Groves Oral History: Well for a kid 10 years old it just sounded like he was lonely, and he wanted somebody to come out there and be around him. But as I got grown older and I viewed the situation, he was hoping that black people could catch a vision that they could do something for themselves and he thought that land was where they could help themselves. That's why - I'm sure that was his vision. But he couldn't get anyone to see it that way.

[Music fades in]

Noel: But Jackson clung to his dream, often at the expense of the values he hoped Dearfield would embody.

[Music fades out]

Peggy Ford Waldo: Being always the entrepreneur, he offered the site of Deerfield as perhaps a potential site for a Japanese internment camp here in the state of Colorado, which as you know, ended up being down in southeastern Colorado, near Lamar. He also put an ad in the newspaper and he offered just to sell everything in Dearfield at, quote "invoice prices", all the fixtures, all the furniture, and... As things got bad in the 1930s Jackson began just to take down the existing cabins and sell the wood for lumber.

Tyler: When O.T. Jackson died in 1949, his niece, Jennie Jackson, became the last resident of Dearfield, Colorado.

Noel: In an article titled "Dearfield, Colorado: Population 1" written before her death, she said:

Voice Actor: “I was shocked at what had happened to Dearfield. I had visited it before the Depression, and Dearfield then was lively and growing. People were writing to their folks to come out and settle, and there were always visitors at Uncle Oliver’s. It was nothing in those days for the Governor or other distinguished officials to drop in. Everyone believed in Dearfield. In 1943 everything was different. The houses were tumble-down, and weeds were growing in the streets. Uncle Oliver and one or two others were all that was left of the whole town.”

[Old West Music fades in]

Noel: She lived there by herself until 1971.

Tyler: Even though there were some differences, Nicodemus nearly suffered the same fate as Dearfield.

Angela Bates: and the town prospered until the mid 1880s when they thought they were going to get the railroad. And when the railroad didn't materialize and it went south of the river and the little railroad camp which they turned into a town called Bogue, named it after one of the engineers. That's when Nicodemus lost its economic base. Everybody had businesses. Pretty much everybody had businesses in here, literally picked up their businesses and moved over there, and that just pulled the economic base out of Nicodemus.

Noel: This is Angela Bates talking to Stephanie Daniel again. She's the Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society.

Angela Bates: So from that point onward Nicodemus started going into an economic downward spiral. Yeah. Decline. and then the Great Depression and the Dirty Thirties, people continued to leave. But after that people continue to come back every generation. When they retired they would come back. and so our parents would come back and retire. And so there's a bunch of us that have come back and retired. You know, we've always, some of us have always wanted to live here, so we kind of repopulate the town, even though it's still...

Noel: Stephanie asked Lucresea Horne why Nicodemus is still around...

Lucresea Horne: You want to know why we're still here? Oh my goodness, because we had that tough grit and determination to make it work, and nothing was gonna stop us.

Tyler: We asked the same question to Phyllis Howard, a park ranger at the Nicodemus Historical Site: Why is Nicodemus still around when it experienced so many of the same political, economic, and nature-related hardships as the other all-black towns?

Phyllis Howard: And the one of the things that make Nicodemus a success is they work together. There was a group of people that came out around Georgetown, Lexington, Kentucky and they were mostly related to one another and they knew each other. So they worked together with hard work and determination that made. it. work. And they stuck together, so that's the big difference, and in fact some would tell you that *is* why Nicodemus survived, because that sense of family. We can work together. We stick this out. We can make it work. And that they did do.

[Music fades in]

Noel: For Stephanie Daniel, the trip to Nicodemus was a glimpse into her own family's past and into a different way of being Black in America.

Stephanie Daniel Audio Diary: Saturday June 29th, audio diary. I really enjoyed walking around Nicodemus and learning more about the history of the town. Not many people still live here but it's still home for the thousands of descendants who live across the U.S. and even the world, and still come to visit their grandparents or family that live here, or come back for the annual homecoming celebration. So my ancestors who were also freed slaves from Kentucky, they lived in Kansas for a while before continuing on to Colorado. So even though they didn't settle in Nicodemus, hearing what the black settlers faced as they founded the town gave me some insight into what my ancestors may have encountered as they headed west for a new free life.

Noel: When she got back, we asked her about her insights.

Tyler: So I'm mixed race and I grew up in a part of Colorado where I was never really around anybody that looked like me. And, I know you grew up in Denver, and from what you've said, it sounds like you've had a similar experience growing up. And I'm wondering if you can reflect at all about what it might've been like to grow up in a place like Nicodemus where you were around people who looked like you, and shared your history and your culture?

Stephanie Daniel: I think it would have given me a real sense of self, and you have a place, and you know that you belong, and having pride in yourself and having pride in your community. It goes a long way. And that - and that kind of pride really trickles down to who you are as a person, knowing how much pride you know your - your grandparents had and your parents had in your community and being part of a black community.

Noel: So what insights do you feel like Nicodemus gave you into yourself and your own racial identity?

Stephanie Daniel: I think it just made me really proud. Really proud, to... I mean I'm proud anyway, and I'm always amazed at my ancestors and just how they went through all of these trials with so much strength and courage, and so I think to see you know coming from that, these ex-slaves, you know, starting this town and to just really be able to hold onto it and not to, not to sell their land and to really have a place where people who are descendants can come back to, and they - they feel like it's home.

[Old West music fades in then out]

Noel: Though DEARFIELD didn't quite make it as a living community, it's legacy is one of self-determination, says Dr. Quintard Taylor. He's Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Washington and the author of *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West*.

Dr. Quintard Taylor: It's the idea, the very, very simple idea that's as old as humankind: How do we control our destiny? How do we control the resources that are in our communities? How do we make sure that we have the resources that we need to live full and rich lives? And that was - that was the impetus I think for the people who went to Deerfield. That was the impetus for the people who went to Nicodemus and indeed all of those towns. Then there were literally hundreds of those towns all across America including a few in the south.

Tyler: Dr. Taylor says that the need to create all-Black towns and communities largely ended after segregation laws were dismantled during the Civil rights movement in the 50s and 60s.

Noel: The struggle for self-determination then shifted to urban areas where African Americans had to contend with poverty, redlining, and other discriminatory housing practices. Taylor says ghettos became the new all-Black communities.

Dr. Quintard Taylor: And so if that's the case how do you get power in the ghetto? Stokely Carmichael talked about this a lot. He said, we need black power. We - we're going to be in the ghettos. So how do we get control over those ghettos? How do we get control over those resources, because the worst aspect of ghetto life is that the resources are controlled from outside.

Tyler: Dr. Taylor says that black separatist groups like The Black Panther party arose as a result of that struggle, and the struggle for self-determination continues with groups like Black Lives Matter.

Noel: This, says Dr. Taylor, is why historical stories about all-Black settlements AND Afro-Futurist superhero stories like *Black Panther* are so relevant.

[Old West music fades in]

Dr. Quintard Taylor: I realize it's a movie, but to create the sense that there is a powerful African nation that's been hidden away and obviously it was a fictional area in Africa. But I think the driving force for - behind this notion of this self-contained, self-controlled community, the driving force was the same driving force that - that led people to try to get to Nicodemus or Dearfield or any of the all-black towns in Oklahoma and Texas or even Mound Bayou in Mississippi. Control of resources and thus control over one's destiny.

[Old West Music fades out]

Noel: For Phyllis Howard, Park Ranger and interpreter at Nicodemus Historical Site, all black settlements are one of the most important historical examples of African Americans taking control of their destinies.

Tyler: She says that in some ways, Nicodemus is keeping that story alive.

Phyllis Howard: You have just come through what, 200 years of slavery and now know, you have that freedom that this piece of land I'm standing on will be mine, and no one can come along and take that from me. In fact, you can now learn how to read and write. No one could take that from you. I call it the American dream.

[Old West music fades in]

Noel: Here's Angela Bates, Executive Director of the Nicodemus Historical Society.

Angela Bates: This is an American story. It's not just our story, it's a part of American history, and we represent what African-Americans did with their freedom. You know, they started their own all-black towns. They didn't wait for reparations. They started on all-black towns and they created a town that they left for the generations to come and we're here as stewards of it.

[Old West Music fades out]

[Music fades in]

Credits:

Tyler: *Lost Highways* is a production of History Colorado and History Colorado Studios. It's made possible by a generous grant from the Sturm family foundation, with particular thanks to Stephen Sturm and Emily Sturm.

Noel: If you enjoyed this podcast and want to support it, please become a member of History Colorado. You can get 20% off your membership at [Historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount](https://historycolorado.org/podcastdiscount). Plus, you get all kinds of great benefits, like free admission to our 8 museums around the state.

Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

Noel: Special thanks to Dr. Susan Shulten, our history editor, and to Chief Creative Officer Jason Hanson, our editor for this episode.

Tyler: Thanks also to our voice actors, Philip Clapham and Anna Mascorella.

Noel: And to Conor Bourgal, who composed our theme and the music.

Tyler: Oral Histories in this episode were conducted by Margaret Picher, and were provided by the Denver Public Library's WEstern History and Genealogy Department. Including oral histories OH170-1 with Beatrice Rainey, OH170-2 with Charles Rothwell, and OH170-3 with Walker Groves, from the Western History Collection.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff of History Colorado. I'm Noel Black.

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.

[Music fades out]