

BLACK HOMESTEADERS Scratching Out A Living

BY JON FARRAR

To survive on a 640-acre Kinkaid claim in the Sandhills, settlers worked out whenever they could to supplement what the rangeland grudgingly provided.

THE LESSON was quick and painful for settlers who came to the North Loup Valley during the early years of the 20th century—a free section of land was not enough for a cattle ranch, and the soil was too fragile for farming. Many, when faced with these prospects, pulled out after a year or two, some stayed long enough to gain a deed then sold out, and a few looked for ways to supplement what their claims provided. The unforgiving hills paid no heed to the color of the settler's skin.

Most of the blacks at the DeWitty settlement worked on neighboring ranches. Charles Speese, the father of Ava Day who chronicled the history of the black settlement, probably had more irons in the fire than most. In addition to farming, running cattle, and raising mules, he also freighted.

"Maybe he could have had a year-round job working for someone," Ava said in a 1987 interview, "but my dad was kind of an independent guy. Work for somebody else was not his cup of tea. He would do it if he had to, and every fall he did, but he was his own man when he freighted."

Speese hauled supplies, usually out of Seneca, for neighboring homesteaders, ranchers, schools, anyone who needed a job done. Ava recalls that he used a four-horse team and it took him four days to make a round trip. Coal delivered to the rural schools cost \$22.50 per ton by the time it was freighted.

Other black homesteaders hired out to neighboring ranches, particularly during the haying season. Don Hanna Jr., a Brownlee area rancher whose family settled in the North Loup Valley

before 1900, recalls that his father hired men like Turner Price, who brought their own horses and ran mowers, by the day. For many years Albert Riley worked for the Triple-L ranch. In *A Sandhills Century, A History of Cherry County, Nebraska*, Hanna wrote that George Riley "was a mule-skinner without equal, and worked our mules during several summers of the early 1920s." William Ford was said to have walked 14 miles from his home to the Lee ranch and back again each day to work, arriving before seven in the morning and leaving after dark. Charles Speese hayed county roads. Those determined to stay on their land let no opportunity pass to earn cash for the necessities of life.

Although most of the black homesteaders' wives had their hands full with domestic chores and large families, some worked out to earn money for staples that could not be grown or made. Corinna (Walker) Williams recalled that work was almost always available, and "with good pay." Her father's claim was near William Steadman's ranch and she often worked in the kitchen there, was paid a dollar a day, and could have her child with her. She also did washing for the ranch hands. Ava Day's grandmother Meehan worked in kitchens and was also the community midwife.

When Ava's mother, Rosetta, first came to the North Loup Valley she worked on the Robert Lee ranch and was so taken with one of the children, Ava Lee, that she named her second daughter after her.

R. H. "Uncle" Bob Hannahs, had a claim along the North Loup River but for many years he also served as Brown-



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Ed Hannahs, Boss Woodson, Glenn Hannahs and other settlers hired out during the haying season to bring in extra money.

lee's barber.

"Uncle Bob Hannahs' master was his father," Don Hanna Jr. tells. "Uncle Bob," as everyone called him, was a slave until he was eight years old. He must have been born about 1856 or 1857. When the Civil War was over, Uncle Bob's master told him he could take his name, but he would either have to add a letter to it or take a letter off. His father's name was Hannah, with an 'h' on the end. So, Uncle Bob put an 's' on it so his name was Hannahs. He ran the barber shop in Brownlee for many

years, at least for 10, maybe 15, until he got too old to go down there.

"He'd be down there two days a week, Fridays and Saturdays," Hanna continued.

"And, he cut hair out of his house on his claim where Big Creek enters the North Loup River west of Brownlee. He started riding in a buggy between town and his claim when he got older. One night he was coming home from Brownlee in his buggy and something happened; he got tangled up in the buggy and broke his leg. He had to quit barber-

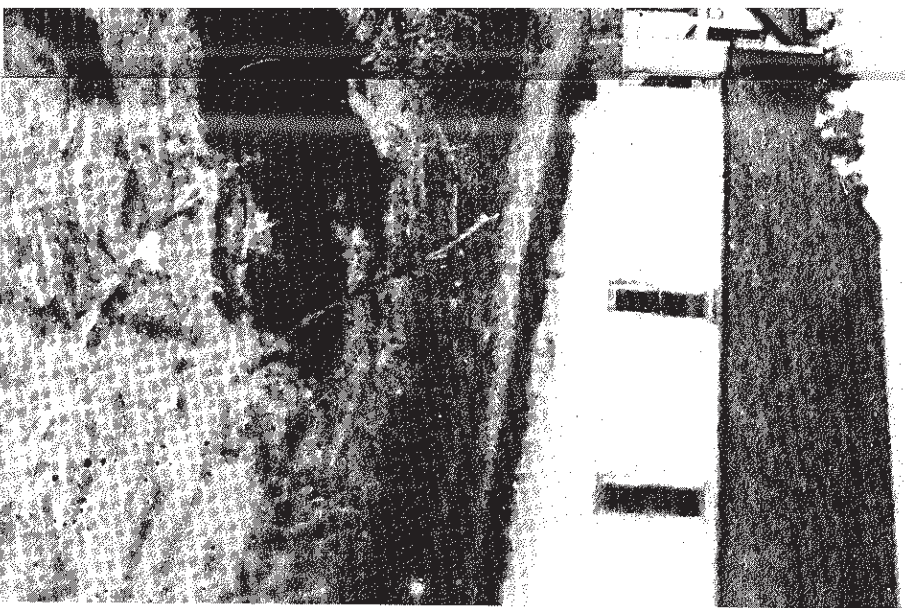
ing, in about 1925, and soon after that he left this country."

Brownlee was the closest town to the black settlers. Its stores stocked the staples of life and a few of the amenities. DeWitty, about a mile south of the North Loup River and roughly in the center of the black settlement, was closer, but the variety of items in Mile's store was limited. It was sort of the "quick shop" of rural Cherry County in the early days of the century.

In "The Lost Pioneers," published in *Negro Digest* in May 1963, author Beryl

Decker wrote: "Ed White, who has run a store at Brownlee for many years, says that they [the operators of the DeWitty store] used to purchase merchandise from his store to sell from the DeWitty store."

The DeWitty site began as a sod house occupied by Miles DeWitty who was the area's postmaster. Later a frame building was added which served as the store. Another black settler, William Crawford, carried the mail out of Seneca to DeWitty with a team and wagon. In 1915 and 1916, it was the



School and leader in the prayer meetings. Many denominations, but mostly Methodist and Presbyterian, were represented and all joined in the services and supported the one church."

Ava Day recalls the church had about 10 or 15 rows of seats, two benches per row and about six seats to a bench. There was a raised platform for the pulpit and for programs.

Rev. W. H. Manse remained in the DeWitty community long enough to prove up on his homestead, as did the next minister, Rev. William Kerby.

According to the writing of Rev. Burckhardt, the black pastors organized a school district and were made members of the school board. Apparently there were three schools in the DeWitty area, all with black teachers.

"School districts 110 and 113 were organized in an area where there were

no white settlers," wrote Beryl Decker in the May 1963 issue of *Negro Digest*.

"Later another district [actually two districts, 164 and 108] was organized for both white and Negro children. Goldie and Fern Walker became school teachers. Goldie, who became Mrs. W.R. Hayes, taught in the rural schools of Cherry County and South Dakota all her life. Her last teaching was in 1956. She was an excellent teacher. Her school rooms were very, very clean and had carpets on the floors and white curtains and the best of all equipment that she could persuade school boards to purchase. She put on many fine musical programs with her pupils."

"We attended a one-room frame school," Ava Day wrote in *Sod House Memories*. "There was a coal bin attached on back and the older boys kept the coal scuttle filled [with coal and cow chips] from the bin. At night in winter the fire was banked after it burned low, a big chunk of coal on top. Come morning, teacher opened the draft and put in more coal. The backlot held two outhouses. In front there was lots of room for pump-pump-pullaway, kitty wants a corner, baseball, etc. If teacher caught us throwing spitballs we had to stand in a corner, or she spanked our hand with a ruler. It was a pretty bad offense if you got spanked; teacher sent a note home with you and you got another spanking. We carried sandwiches of meat, jelly, jam, preserves, prairie chicken, eggs, rabbit, grouse, and sometimes it reached the bread and syrup stage, depending on how the crop had been and the price of beef."

The education of Charles Speese's family was not confined to the school's four walls. Books were available to rural families from the State Library at Lincoln, and Rosetta, Ava's mother, requested many. Their reading menu included the entire set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, autobiographies, classics and poetry. The writing of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, a black southern poet who wrote in the vernacular of southern blacks, was read and interpreted by Ava's father because, as Ava wrote,

"nobody talked like that, not that we'd ever known."

For a time, the rural schools taught through the 10th grade but later, anyone wanting additional education was forced to move to town to get it. The first six of Charles Speese's children, including Ava, only passed through the 8th grade but the rest completed high school and some went on to college. District 113, Ava's first school, located on Charles Meehan's claim, Ava's grandfather, was attended by only black children. Her next school, after her family moved to their own 80-acre claim on the north side of the river, was District 108 and was attended by both black and white children, including Don Hanna and his brother Francis and the Pedersen children. After one year District 108 closed. For Ava and her brothers and sisters it was farther to their assigned school than it was to Brownlee, but Brownlee was not in their district. For a time they drove eight miles to school. As was common in those days, it was decided Rosetta and the children would move to town during the school year so they could receive a proper education. They obtained permission from the county school superintendent in Valentine to attend the school in Seneca, which they did for one day, before they were told there wasn't room for any more pupils, although a family of white children was admitted not long after. That winter of 1923-24, just a year before they moved to South Dakota, Rosetta Speese lived in Theford with her children so they could attend school.

While the little store at DeWitty offered for sale only the basics of life, Brownlee was a thriving little community in the second decade of the 1900s. As Kinkaiders swarmed to the nation's last great land give-away, many Sandhills counties reached their peak population. In 1890, the first date for which a county-wide census is available, Cherry County listed 6,428 inhabitants, 6,541 in 1900, 10,414 in 1910, and 11,753 in 1920. Since 1920, the population has steadily declined, in 1980, Cherry (*Continued on page 43*)

Hunter Ethics Something To Pass On



WHEN I WAS a kid, I lived in a town small enough that it was possible to go hunting without a lot of elaborate preparation or advance planning. As a matter of fact, there were several good spots we could get to on foot, and at a fairly early age our parents decided that one or two of my friends and I were responsible enough to go hunting by ourselves. So, sometimes alone, sometimes together, we often went hunting without adult supervision even before we were old enough to go hunting by ourselves.

So, sometimes alone, sometimes together, we often went hunting without adult supervision even before we were old enough to drive.

In retrospect, I can see that throughout that early period we hunted in several different ways. One was the way we hunted as a group of teenagers, and another was the way we hunted when we were with adults; that mode of behavior involved considerably less urgency, competition, and swaggering.

Fortunately, most of us now hunt quite a lot more like the adults we learned from than like we sometimes did as kids alone. Most of us look back on some of those experiences with at least a little sheepishness.

Now, as an adult, I am often embarrassed by the behavior of other hunters. I see them with their "Happiness is a Warm Gut-Pile" tee-shirts and long belt-knives strutting around small-town cafes. I see them on the street wearing hats covered with mallard tail-curly, and I find road ditches and parking areas littered with shell boxes, lunch trash, and bird entrails. Only the littering is illegal; the rest of it is simply ethically questionable (or unacceptable), and at the least, bad public rela-

tions for hunters, and it casts us all in a bad light.

Worse are the stories I hear from landowners: dead or wounded domestic animals, open gates, four-wheel-drive tracks through the winter wheat, coyotes chased through the pasture by oafs on snowmobiles, shotgun pellets clattering against the picture window, beer cans along the fencerows, and more.

And, there is the behavior I see in the field. Hunters in one blind shooting at ducks circling in response to a caller in another blind. Skybusting. Duck hunters in a cafe offering to give away one limit of birds so they can safely go out and shoot another. Hen mallards hidden in the weeds. Heavily hit quail thrown away so they won't have to be counted in a limit. Turkeys shot out of a roost tree before sunrise. Road hunting. Trespassing of every description. Running game in vehicles. Utter disregard for other hunters in the line of fire.

So what happened, you ask yourself? Why are these otherwise presumably responsible adults so shamelessly adolescent in their hunting behavior?

One part of the answer may be that they have missed having good models. Sometimes it seems to me that the worst adult offenders are hunters who took up the activity relatively late in life; hunters who had little opportunity to admire, and then emulate, an older, more experienced mentor. It probably should not really be surprising that when adults improvise, they often do very little better than children. This may be especially true when the activity is one such as hunting, which can become so charged with overtones of macho "masculinity." Boys can easily learn from older men that manhood is

not defined by a mallard "body-count" or the brand name on one's camo clothing, but if men have not learned it as boys, how do they learn it?

In any event, the lessons learned in the field from good, experienced hunters are not lessons as easily learned from hunter safety classes and magazine articles. None of the ranting and preaching in those forums, however useful as reinforcement, has as much force as the mildly stated but clear approval or disapproval of a respected adult. This is especially true if it can occur when a novice is still young enough to stand at least slightly in awe of the teacher.

Here is where the rest of us come in; this is the point at which those of us who think that how you hunt is more important than what you shoot, need to get involved.

We deserve the privilege of hunting only if we insist that hunting be practiced ethically. Hunting ethics are only real in practice, and they are best passed along by example. Being one of the good guys includes talking the right line, of course, because even tacit approval of slob behavior encourages slob behavior.

But the good you do by taking a new hunter with you on a hunt or two has the potential to shape a lifetime of behavior; kids have a tough time not growing up into slobs if they only have slobs for models.

Ethical hunting is sometimes difficult to define; when you try, you find yourself making long lists of "thou shalt's" and "thou shalt not's." It is much easier, and probably much more effective, to pass along by example, and passing it along is part of the responsibility of the ethical hunter.

Black Homesteaders . . . Scratching Out a Living

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County reported only 6,758 residents.

"There was somewhere between 100 and 150 people in Brownlee," Hanna said of the 1915 to 1920 period. "There were two grocery stores, and I mean they were general mercantile stores. They sold everything from ladies' hosiery to mowing machines. Shockley ran one of them, and A. P. Story the other. There was a bank, a good little bank, hotel, a doctor's office, blacksmith shop and livery barn, drug store, community hall and post office. It had the whole business."

"The town" in the region, though, was Seneca.

"It was a good town," Hanna says of Seneca. "There were a thousand people there. Eight passenger trains a day ran through Seneca, four each way, and every train changed crews in Seneca. It was a railroad town. There was a roundhouse there where they could be working on four of those big old steam engines at the same time. They had a turntable to turn an engine around. They had crews working in that roundhouse 24 hours a day.

When I was 10 or 12, Seneca was a great place. All the livestock was shipped on the railroad in those days, and thousands went out every fall. It was twice as large as Thedford and a better town than Mullen. Thedford wasn't much. All they had was the county seat. The trains used to just whistle right on through Thedford, but Seneca in those days was like going to North Platte is now, even moreso."

Bulky or heavy goods like lumber and coal came out of Seneca because it was the closest rail town to the black settlement. Ava Day said she and the other children seldom went to Seneca, but their father made frequent trips there freighting and it was from Seneca that some of the finer things in life came.

"Our dresses came from Seneca," Ava recalled, "except what we got from Sears or Montgomery Ward catalogs. I don't recall that Brownlee had dresses. Brownlee carried yard goods, a few dresses and blouses, and overalls. I know they carried all kinds of work shoes, especially those that were big with heavy soles. Some had copper



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