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Article Summary: This article provides vivid details of ex-slave African American families lives as they became homesteaders in Nebraska in the late nineteenth century, and in Wyoming in the early twentieth century. In 1908 they founded the town of Empire, Wyoming, about thirty miles northwest of Scottsbluff. They settled there because of a Wyoming school segregation law that allowed the black settlers to form their own public school and hire their own teacher. In most ways, the lives of these black settlers at Empire differed little from those of their white contemporaries. Drought and a poor agricultural economy eventually led to the community's abandonment by the mid-1920s.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Bright, Henry Cunningham, Moses Speese, Hannah Webb, Josiah (Harry) Webb, John Wesley Shores, Patsy Davis, Susan Kirk, George Stoneman, Joseph Speese, Radford Speese, Amos Harris, Eliza Young Harris, William Young, Baseman Taylor, Charles Speese, Otis Taylor, Rosengrant Peyton, Jim Edwards, Yorick Nichols, Russel Taylor, Reverend Haycraft, Albert Marks, Reverend Currens

Names Note: This article presents a large number of names which have not been referenced here. Only central names have been listed. It is recommended that the article itself be referenced for the full scope of family names.

Place Names: Spoon Hill Creek; Custer County, South Dakota; South Pass City, Wyoming; Platte River; Yadkin County, North Carolina; Seward, Nebraska; Westerville, South Dakota; Westerville, Nebraska; Empire, Wyoming; Sheep Creek Valley

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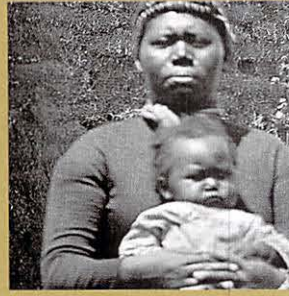
Photographs / Images: *American Progress*, 1872 painting by John Gast; Known children and grandchildren of Moses Shores [chart]; Moses Speese family photographed by Solomon Butcher near Westerville, Custer County, Nebraska, 1888; Neighbors to the Speese, the Shores family photograph by Solomon Butcher, 1887; small inset from the *Custer County Chief*, 1898 re: The Speese Jubilee Singers; the Shores family, 1892; Speese family Migration to and from Empire, 1880-1925 [chart]; a modern view of Sheep Creek Valley, former site of Empire, Wyoming; Russel Taylor of Bellevue College, about 1896; Russel Taylor with Bellevue College's Adelpian Literary Society circa 1896; the congregation of the integrated Haycraft Baptist Church [the Sheep Creek Baptist Church of God]; Jubilee Singers of Lexington Business College, Lexington, Nebraska, in 1909; Radford Speese stuccoed sod house, Sioux County, Nebraska

In September 1908, covered wagons carrying several African American families crested a ridge on the Nebraska-Wyoming border about thirty miles northwest of Scottsbluff. The weary emigrants regarded the valley of Spoon Hill Creek before them as their promised land. Gazing across the valley, they envisioned an empire of prosperous homesteads nurturing scores of black families for generations to come.

The Empire Builders

An African American Odyssey
in Nebraska and Wyoming





Long before their time, John Quincy Adams expressed his belief in the nation's manifest destiny with the words, "Westward the star of empire takes its way."¹ Though Adams and the preceding generation of founding fathers envisioned the continent being settled by white pioneers of northern European origin, people of color shared the dream. They, too, sought better lives on the western frontiers. The story of this group is a saga of persistence and courage that spanned generations.

The name they would choose for their new community?

EMPIRE

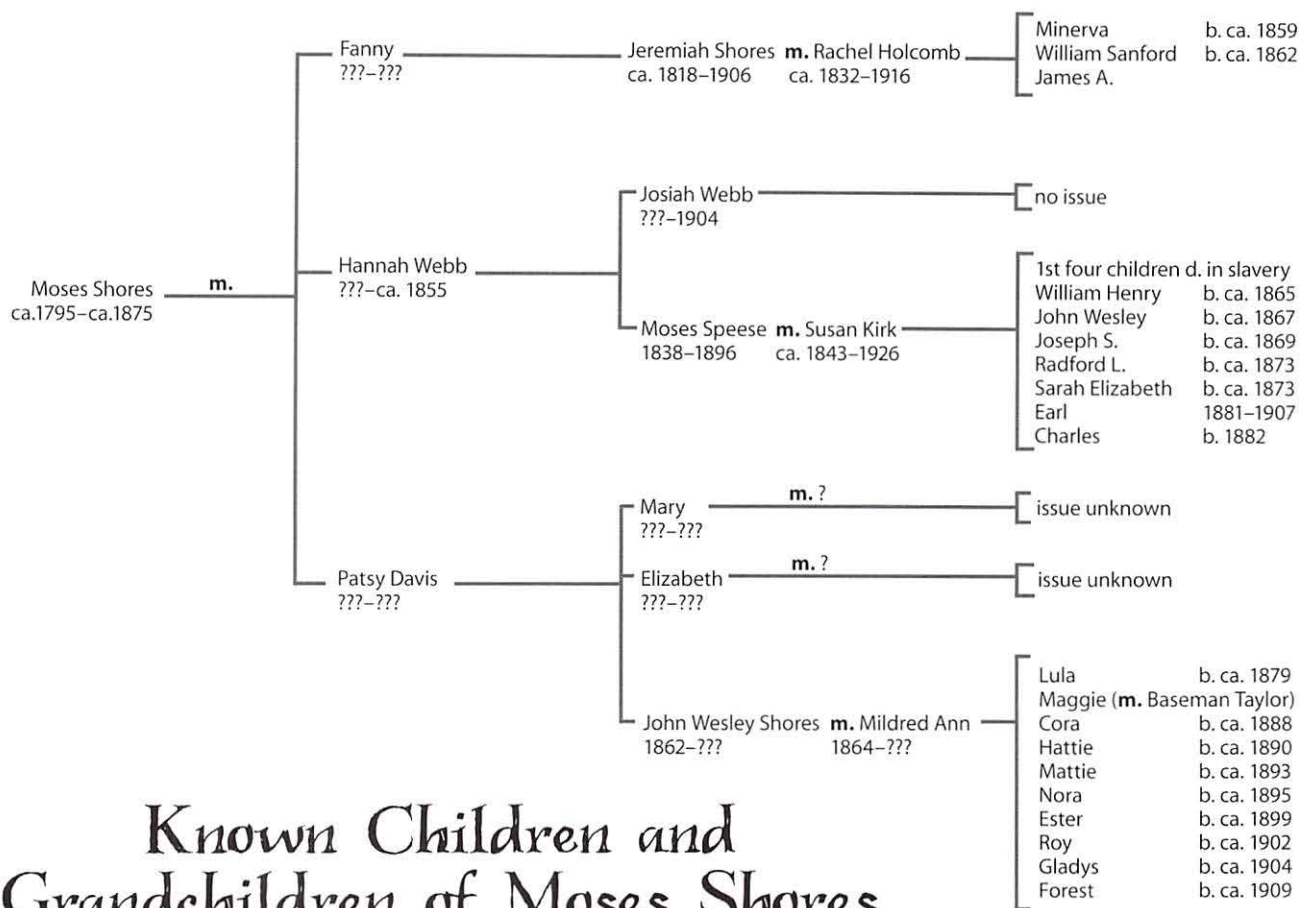
The Spoon Hill settlers had just concluded a quarter-century as successful Nebraska farmers. Tens of thousands of ex-slaves from the Deep South, called Exodusters, claimed Nebraska and Kansas homesteads during the late 1870s and 1880s. By the turn of the twentieth century, poverty forced most to abandon their agrarian dreams and move to Omaha, Kansas City or other urban places in search of wage labor. The Spoon Hill settlers were not part of the Exoduster movement and differed from the majority of Exodusters in their origins, the timing and route of their flight from the South, their success as homesteaders, and their decision to relocate from their Custer County farms not to a city but to a still more rural and isolated location.²

In the best mythic tradition of covered wagon emigrants, they sought new and better homes farther West. These experienced prairie sodbusters were not fooled by the anachronistic, Jeffersonian myth of the garden that inspired nineteenth century pioneers. They knew rain didn't follow the plow, and that grasshoppers and other problems would plague them, yet they mistakenly believed that they could find brighter futures nearer the setting sun. Thus, this wagon train formed the advance party of a larger migration that would create a whole new community on the Nebraska-Wyoming border.

BY TODD GUENTHER

Reports of better economic and social opportunities in Wyoming and diverse factors in Nebraska spurred their departure to the allegedly more liberal "Equality State." They were unaware that Wyoming's vaunted reputation was built on a foundation of racism. William Bright, the South Pass City legislator and Virginia native who was largely responsible for the revolutionary 1869 woman suffrage law, explained his stance thus: since black men had been enfranchised, supposedly superior white women ought to be able to cast ballots as well, in order that they would not be ranked below former slaves in the social hierarchy. Throughout their stay on Spoon Hill Creek, the black pioneers' economic and environmental woes would be compounded by covert—and sometimes brutally overt—racism.³

Page 176: *American Progress*, an 1872 painting by John Gast. This iconic image represents the nineteenth century notion of Manifest Destiny in all its hubris. "Westward the star of empire takes its way," the saying went—and for some African Americans, westward migration represented the hope of escaping the racist confines of the East. Courtesy of the Museum of the American West, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, 92126.1



Known Children and Grandchildren of Moses Shores

The Spoon Hill Creek settlers were recruited by a sly fellow named Henry Cunningham, a promoter for the Empire Land and Cattle Investment Company. He transplanted fruit tree saplings along the creek and then represented store-bought apples as having been picked from the trees in this new Garden of Eden. As far as the black pioneers could tell, the climate and soil were productive and there was sufficient water to irrigate several hundred acres that Cunningham offered for sale. The huge Interstate Canal had recently been built through the area to bring precious water from the North Platte River to the prairie fifteen miles north. More settlers were bound to come, and land values would rise. There was no time for indecision.⁴

MOSES AND THE EXODUS The settlers' journey began long before in the dissatisfied mind of an ex-slave named Moses Speese, the father or grandfather of most of those in the wagons. The patriarch of the Spoon Hill Creek

settlers was aptly named for the biblical hero who guided the Israelites out of bondage in the Book of Exodus. Moses was born into slavery near Fayetteville, in south-central North Carolina, but was later taken or sold to Yadkin County in the northwestern part of the state. His surname was that of the last man who had owned him. His siblings had diverse surnames, a legacy of slave families being ripped apart generation after generation by the sale of human beings or by premature death. Men and women often cohabited with a series of "spouses" in "slave marriages," which their white owners disregarded as having no moral or legal standing or permanence. Their children became the property of the mothers' owners and used that surname until they were sold to someone else.

This antebellum nightmare would be a contributing factor in driving the Spoon Hill settlers from Nebraska to Wyoming in 1908, nearly a half century after the Civil War ended. It also shaped their

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individual lives and family structure for nearly a century. The Speese family's reaction to their pre-war life was steely resolve to collect the whole family and remain together through subsequent generations and cross-continental migrations, to create and maintain the strength provided by a large extended family, to marry advantageously, and to work together to realize individual and common goals in the face of many obstacles.

The confused genealogy begins with Moses Speese's father, also named Moses, who was born about 1800. He married "by slave custom" a woman named Fanny who delivered a son named Jeremiah about 1818. They probably had other children who either died young or disappeared later into slavery's charnel house. One or the other parent was apparently sold, and Moses senior next called Hannah Webb his wife. She delivered Josiah (sometimes called Harry) Webb, and then the family seems to have endured another sale, for their next child was Moses Speese in 1838. Hannah died in 1855 after living her entire life in slavery. Moses senior next "married" Patsy Davis. They both must have become the property of one of the Shore or Shores families in Yadkin County before she delivered John Wesley Shores (born about 1862) and girls named Mary and Elizabeth. Patsy died in 1865 or 1866. Now in freedom, Moses Shores returned to his first love, Fanny, and they may have married legally. At this time, if not before, Moses senior and Fanny's now middle-aged son, Jeremiah, took their surname, Shores. All the surviving siblings and their father seem to have lived on neighboring farms in rural Yadkin County and kept track of each other's whereabouts.⁵

Moses Speese's wife, Susan Kirk, was born about 1843 or 1844 near Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It is unknown whether Moses and Susan were owned by the same master or neighbors, but they "started a family before freedom came."⁶ Their first four children died young in the anonymity of slavery. Seven of their twelve children survived to adulthood. The first surviving child was William Henry, whom the family called Henry. He appears to have been born in May 1865, just weeks after freedom came in the form of 6,000 Union cavalrymen under General George Stoneman. William Henry Speese became the first family member never to live a day in slavery since his ancestors were kidnapped in Africa. His birth was followed by brothers John Wesley about December 1867; Joseph or Josiah S. in January 1869; and Radford L. about March 1873. All three became leaders in Empire.⁷

After the Civil War, Moses Speese struggled in poverty as a sharecropper. The Yadkin county economy was a shambles. The white landlord took advantage of Moses' illiteracy to over-charge him for supplies, and demanded payment for goods he did not order or receive. When Moses expressed his desire to acquire free land he'd heard about in the West, the infuriated landlord told him that he could go, but his wife and children would have to remain as collateral on Moses' debts. Speese described his dilemma to a neighbor who late in 1871 or 1872 hauled him, hidden beneath a load of hay, to the railroad in the next county and then bought him a ticket north to New Castle, Indiana, and safety. Moses may have chosen his destination because it was familiar: numerous white Union supporters had fled Yadkin County to Indiana, including to New Castle, during or shortly after the war.

And thus began the Speeses' long exodus toward the Promised Land on Spoon Hill Creek, an odyssey that would last a half century. In Indiana Moses dug ditches and took any job he could get, while accumulating funds he trustingly mailed to the former neighbor who had helped him. By 1873 they had saved enough money to transport the rest of the family north. Susan and the boys hid beneath another load of hay and then boarded a northbound train to join Moses across the Ohio River.⁸

Moses and Susan had another child while living in New Castle: Sarah Elizabeth was born about August 1873. Moses' father and stepmother, Moses and Fannie Shores, followed him north to New Castle and lived the remainder of their lives in Indiana. Moses' siblings also came north, including John Wesley Shores and his wife, Millie Ann, who came in 1880, followed by Jerry (Jeremiah) Shores and his wife, Rachel, and Moses' half-sisters, Mary Hauser and Lizzie Stimpson. Their existence as wage-laborers during the national financial turmoil of the 1870s was grueling, and race-hatred brutalized their children. They longed to heed the Siren call of the West where free land would enable them to become farmers.⁹

Moses led his followers to Nebraska just a few years after the Sioux and Cheyenne were confined to reservations, and simultaneously with the mass migration of Exodusters fleeing the Deep South. Moses and his family settled near the predominantly German-Lutheran community of Seward in early 1880. The seven Speeses shared a crowded sod house with a Prussian immigrant

They longed to heed the Siren call of the West where free land would enable them to become farmers.



family of nine, a German-American teacher's family of five, and an unmarried black farmer from South Carolina. Moses quickly went to work hauling freight with a newly purchased team and wagon. The children attended a German-language school and learned to speak, count, and sing *auf Deutsch*. In September 1881 Susan delivered another son, Earl, who suffered throughout his life from a debilitating disease and was described as "crippled." Moses and Susan's last child, Charles, was born at home on January 8, 1882.¹⁰

In October 1882 Moses led the family farther west to Westerville in Custer County. There, nearly a decade after fleeing North Carolina, they finally built a home on their own farm. By 1885, twenty years after the war ended, their three cows produced 300 pounds of butter per year. They had seventy chickens that produced 1,800 eggs, and their fields produced more bushels per acre than most of the neighbors'. The Speeses shared a similar lifestyle and aspirations with neighboring white homesteaders. A remarkable difference was that their material success exceeded that of some whites and nearly all Exoduster families. The former was especially incredible considering that many whites had sold farms or businesses in the East or Europe to finance their new lives. The Speeses, on the other hand, started life with nothing and had themselves been owned like farm animals.¹¹

A famous Solomon Butcher photograph, familiar to generations of Nebraskans and students of

Moses Speese family, photographed by Solomon Butcher near Westerville, Custer County, Nebraska, 1888. NSHS RG2608-1345

Western history, shows that the house was a relatively large, well-maintained multi-room soddy. At least one glass window let the prairie sunshine brighten the dark interior. Moses and his older sons broke the sod and planted their own fields. A windmill provided water. They acquired several teams of fine horses and vehicles, including a fancy two-seated buggy and the necessary farm equipment. They built neat frame outbuildings behind the house. Like the farm, the family was immaculately clean, healthy, strong, and proud. Susan and Sarah took good care of hearth, home, and the younger children according to the gender roles of the day. By the late 1880s the Speeses were able to afford luxuries including fashionable clothing. Their financial success was not due entirely to the men's labor in the fields. Susan, who had cooked on southern plantations, was often hired by neighbors to feed the multitudes at community gatherings.¹²

Moses' brother, Jerry Shores, relocated his family from Indiana to Nebraska by May 1887. Three generations of the Shores family lived together in sod buildings pleasantly situated next to a stream. Their buildings were not laid up with the same care and precision evident at Moses' place, nor were they as well-maintained. The Shores' farmyard was not kept in such tidy order, and their

stock was not as numerous or as fine. Their clothing was patched during the 1880s, but by the early 1890s their clothing and even their house were in better repair.¹³

Jerry's laid-back attitude about life and relaxed relationships with white children are illustrated by the following anecdote:

There was a colored family named Shores who lived close to my grandparents. . . My father and his brothers liked to visit there. They tell a story about being there one day [when] Uncle [Jerry] Shores was tipped back in his chair with his hat down over his face taking a snooze. The boys had been out in the pasture roaming around when brother Jo stepped on a cactus plant. He lay screaming in the pasture. The others ran to the house to tell Uncle [Jerry] Shores.

He tipped his hat up a little, looked at them and said, "Well, leave him alone, and he'll get off it." And he went back to sleep.¹⁴

By July 1887 another brother, John Wesley Shores, his wife Millie Ann, and their children arrived from New Castle and settled adjacent to Moses. Josiah Webb, cruelly mutilated and crippled by slavery (and who apparently never married), also claimed one hundred acres of Nebraska prairie in the vicinity of his brothers. He lived out the remainder of his life there and in Ansley.¹⁵

Education remained a consistent theme as Moses and Susan's children reached adulthood. Beginning as early as 1887, Henry, John W., and Radford all attended Tabor College, a private religious institution in Iowa. This was a remarkable achievement, especially given the nation's financial crisis of the mid-1890s and farmers' lack of cash. The choice seems even stranger since the University of Nebraska and other church-affiliated private institutions were much closer to home. However, Tabor's administration had been involved with the Underground Railroad and provided housing for John Brown and his weapons prior to the Civil War. Those facts may have made that institution desirable to African Americans. After graduating in 1895, Henry reportedly entered the Union Theological Seminary in Chicago in 1896 (though no evidence has been located to verify his enrollment), and became an ordained African Methodist Episcopal minister. During his career he served congregations in Yankton, South Dakota, Westerville, Nebraska, and others in Illinois and California. John W. is believed to have undertaken additional studies at the University of

Neighbors to the Speeses, the Shores family sat for photographer Solomon Butcher in 1887. The figures were later identified, L to R, as: Minerva (holding baby), the Reverend Albert Marks, Rachel and her husband Jerry and their son, Jim Shores.
NSHS RG2608-1231



Nebraska, then apprenticed in law in Topeka, Kansas, and practiced in Oklahoma before rejoining the family in Nebraska. Radford, too, may have studied at the University of Nebraska where, in 1895–96, he was an active member of the Frederick Douglass Intellectual Club. Unlike their neighbors who stayed on the farm, the Speese family, determined to exceed their neighbors' standards of success, spent a small fortune on college educations even while struggling out of slavery-induced poverty. Nationally in 1910 only thirteen percent of Americans were high school graduates, and a mere three percent of Americans held college degrees.¹⁶

The grown children established reputations as professional violinists, singers and pianists. In January 1896 the *Custer County Chief* reported that "Our colored troupe" embarked on a month-long tour though central and western Nebraska. Only

the boys participated because Sarah, raised to be a proper Victorian lady, was not allowed to perform in public, though she did accompany the "Sunday sings" at home and church. The boys were billed variously as "The Slaves Children" and the "Speese

Jubilee Singers." Newspaper accounts from Ord, St. Paul, Boelus, and Alliance suggest that the tour began as a formal, high-culture Jubilee performance of vocal and instrumental music. Rural audiences apparently preferred black performers in stereotypical roles of lowbrow slapstick and degrading slave parody. After the Speeses' flopped performance in St. Paul, the local Knights of Pythias obliged their neighbors a few days later by staging a minstrel show celebrating what local residents thought African American entertainment ought to be like. "Coon shows" were popular diversions that typically showcased whites in black-face makeup who sang, danced and cracked bigoted jokes.

The Speeses toured for profit—probably to fund their educations—and modified their show in response to the public's demands. When they opened in Alliance a week later, they were billed as the Speese Minstrel Show. Their previous dignified play list was gone. An ad in the *Alliance Times* invited, "Come out and laugh—a sure cure for the blues. Hear them jolly colored boys. Hear them coons sing, 'De ole Arks a Movin', Carve dat Possum, De watermelons smiling on de vine," and

others. Tickets were twenty-five and fifty cents. Touring was additionally demeaning during that era when many hotels and restaurants refused to serve African Americans.¹⁷

Back home in the integrated and more tolerant Westerville area, their performances flourished with variety and quality. Rad, an "instrumental musician and singer of some attainment," orchestrated the "Westerville Grand Musical," a program of songs, recitations, instrumental music and dialogues staged on March 19, 1903, in the Methodist Church the Speeses attended and had helped build. It is noteworthy that Radford directed the predominantly white cast of about twenty. Charles was the featured singer and musician who performed more numbers than anyone else. Joe sang at the 1903 Memorial Day and Fourth of July celebrations in Dunning, a community farther north where he and some of the family were then establishing new homes.¹⁸

Year after year through youth and young adulthood, the Speese and Shores children plowed, planted, and harvested, then drove wagonloads of the earth's bounty to town for sale. These young, black men and women who came of age around the turn of the twentieth century were not stereotypical cowboys or sodbusters, but they pulled calves in the spring snow and drove their stock to railheads for shipment to eastern packing houses. They raised good mules that were marketed in Omaha. They became intimately familiar with the demands of climate, soils, crop selection and rotation, and fluctuations in eastern markets. They learned how to read and write, to weigh complex issues, and make decisions that would have long-lasting repercussions on their families' well being. They learned to survive by farming and ranching on the arid plains.

By the time they came to full adulthood, however, the farming lands of central Nebraska were settled and full. The families would have to move again if the children were to have land of their own. In spite of their educations and other skills, most remained tied to the land by agrarian dreams in the vein of Thomas Jefferson.

Moses, like his Biblical namesake, did not survive to lead the continuing search for the Promised Land. He died in April 1896 and was buried in the Westerville cemetery. Other family members who perished about this time included Moses' brothers, Josiah Webb, who died in 1904, and Jerry Shores, who passed away in December 1906. Moses and Susan's sickly son, Earl, who may have been

The Speese Jubilee singers have just completed a tour through eastern Nebraska, and you will miss the treat of the season if you fail to hear their hits, gags and farces. They sing to crowded houses every where.

Custer County Chief
(Broken Bow), Jan. 17, 1898



The Shores family, photographed in 1892. Photo is labeled, left to right, Armsted, unidentified baby, Rachel, Minerva, Jerry, and two unidentified figures. NSHS RG2301-3-4

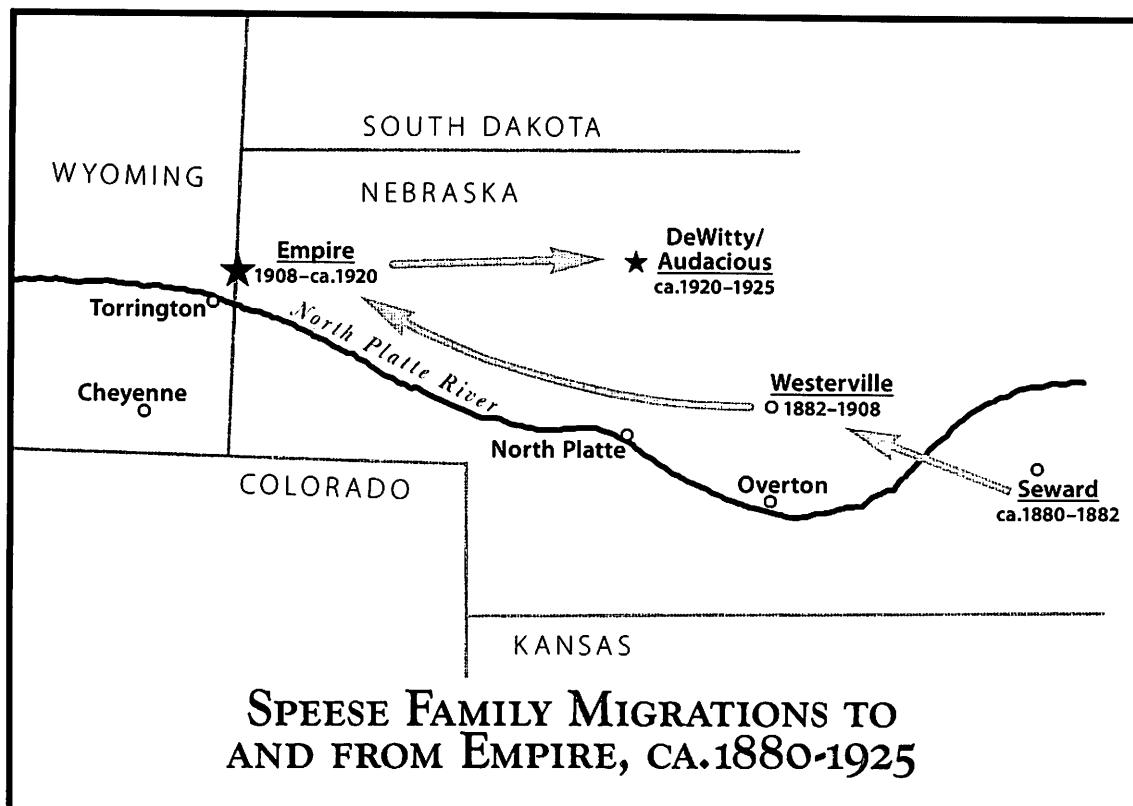
epileptic, died in the “insane hospital” in Lincoln in April 1907.¹⁹

In spite of the deaths, the extended family grew through marriages and births as Moses and Susan’s children, nieces and nephews started families of their own, which added urgency to the search for a new home. None of the Speeses married members of failing Exoduster families. Most wed children of earlier, financially secure black pioneer families. Henry often performed the ceremonies. The Speese men generally waited until they were mature and financially independent to assume the Victorian-era masculine heads of household role. Sarah, too, married late when in 1903, at age 25, she wed Otis Taylor, who would become a leading figure in Empire. His brother Baseman had previously wed Maggie Shores; Baseman would later have a horrific role in the fall of Empire. The Taylors had roots in Virginia but came out of slavery in Missouri. In about 1881, they settled near Seward, Nebraska, where their lives became intimately entwined with the extended Speese and Shores families.²⁰

This second generation of Speese and Shores families began their first tentative journeys in search of new pastures in 1900. That October Joseph and Radford Speese applied for a homestead just east of Halsey in Blaine County, roughly sixty miles northwest of

Westerville. Although a local newspaper wrote that Joe and Rad were the only two “colored” men in Blaine County, they were welcomed by neighboring Thomas County’s resident black cowboy, Amos Harris and his wife, Eliza (Young), a sister of Joe Speese’s wife, Lizzie. The Speeses, whose brand was the S Bar P, planned to build a cattle ranch using purchased and leased land and relatives’ homestead claims.

In the spring of 1901 the boys’ mother, Susan, joined them and filed on 160 acres a short distance east of Joe’s claim. Next, their uncle, John Wesley Shores, who was only five or six years older than Joe, brought his wife and children to Halsey. Eliza Harris and Lizzie Speese’s brother, William Young, a farmer and blacksmith at Dunning, married the Shores’s daughter Lulu in 1901. They sang and performed, and Rad taught Sunday School at one of the local churches. For several years life was promising. The local farm economy improved in 1907 when at least two railroad cars of sugar beets were shipped from the area, establishing a new cash crop. In September both Joe and his mother, Susan, happily proved up on their claims and obtained title to their farms.²¹



Their opinions of the area soured that fall. Local school funding problems—related to the statewide issue of opening scores of rural schools to serve new homestead communities—were aggravated by a minstrel show in which local whites in blackface mocked black stereotypes. This form of entertainment was common across the nation; in this case it was staged to raise money for a nearby rural school. The Speeses, disgusted by racism, inadequate financial support for existing schools, and possibly legal problems with their land claims, again heard the Sirens' song when the *Ansley* newspaper reported newly irrigated land available in eastern Wyoming. Though large numbers of black farm families, including some of the Shores, were moving to the Sand Hills and settling in new communities in Cherry County, the Speeses and Taylors decided instead to move west. By December they had sold their Blaine County ranch to relatives by marriage, William and Ambrose Young, who like their sister Eliza (Young) Harris, chose to remain there. When the Speeses made arrangements to purchase property on the Wyoming border, the *Brewster News* reported that Joe was elated by the prospects in his new home. Among other things, though his barn and nearly seven hundred acres of family-owned land would be in Nebraska, his house would be across the line in Wyoming, meaning that his children could go to school there. He

claimed that school laws were much more liberal in Wyoming than in Nebraska.²²

Then, in 1908, the horror and degradation of slavery was resurrected and dealt the Speese and Shores families a terrible blow. After Josiah Webb died intestate, the Nebraska court system stepped in to consider claims to his 160 acre estate by siblings or their descendants. The Nebraska Supreme Court finally decided the case, ruling that because Moses Speese was the only other issue of Josiah Webb's mother, only Speese's heirs were entitled to the estate. Because slaves could not legally marry in antebellum North Carolina, the judges reasoned that all children of slaves were illegitimate.

Such reasoning placed a damning, insurmountable social stigma on the entire family. Slavery had physically maimed and crippled Josiah Webb. Now that institution reached from the grave to cripple his survivors in heart and mind. In the eyes of the Nebraska Supreme Court, the rest of the state government, and the people of Nebraska: they were bastards. All their long labors to succeed in white society both financially and socially, their aspirations toward acceptance, to be seen as good citizens, to be perceived as pious and proper by their neighbors' rigorous Victorian standards, had come to naught. Fury and shame intensified their determination to leave Nebraska and re-create themselves farther west.²³

EMPIRE During the first half of 1908, as Joe and Rad finalized plans to move to Wyoming, most of the remaining Speeses and Taylors near Westerville decided likewise to buck the “Sandhills trend” and move west. Henry and his family instead moved to the southern tip of Illinois, where he served several black congregations. The other Speeses finalized their agreement with the Wyoming rancher, Cunningham, and traded their developed Westerville-area farms for about 800 acres of his sagebrush and soon-to-be irrigated fields north of Henry, Nebraska, and Torrington, Wyoming. The Speese and Taylors each claimed 320 acres of additional land; at one time the extended families had more than 4,000 acres. The operation was sometimes referred to as the Speese Brothers ranch and at other times as the “Speese Taylor ranch.” Charles sold the family’s Custer County cattle herd in December 1907. In March 1908 the recently widowed Baseman Taylor auctioned his livestock, farm machinery, and household goods preparatory to “quitting farming” to find some other way to care for his little daughter. That same month, the Speese family sold three eighty-acre parcels of Custer County land at \$50 per acre. During the summer Joe and Rad concluded legal matters in Blaine and Custer counties. The anticipated arrival of a group of African American settlers was news in the *Mitchell Index*.²⁴

In late summer of 1908, Joe and Rad with their families, John Speese, and brother-in-law Baseman Taylor finally left for Wyoming driving wagons and loose stock. Rad’s wagon carried a sewing machine that he had won in a contest from a Dunning store earlier in the year. Joe drove a four-horse hitch pulling a heavily laden wagon. His twelve-year-old son, Harry, drove a buggy. Some time later, Charles Speese and Otis Taylor transported their equipment and livestock to Torrington via the railroad. Meanwhile, Charles became a father when his wife, Rose, still back in Nebraska, delivered their first baby. Happily, Taylor’s brother Nathan and his wife, who had moved up from Alliance and claimed a homestead the preceding spring, were waiting for them. After the advance party prepared temporary quarters, the women and children took a train from Westerville to Torrington, where the families were reunited and then climbed into wagons for the ride to Spoon Hill Creek. The family matriarch, aged and widowed ex-slave Susan Speese, had been staying with Charles and Rose. Now she moved west with her large family. With their departure,

the Westerville column in the *Ansley Argosy* ceased.²⁵

All but one of the new arrivals quickly set to work farming. Baseman Taylor was done walking behind a mule. He found work as a hotel cook, probably in Henry or Torrington, where the nearest hotels were located. The others began their new farms midway through the West’s last big boom in homesteading. Between 1889 and 1910, the number of farms in Wyoming leapt from 5,600 to 26,000. Then, during the giddy ag economy inspired by World War I, stock growers doubled the



A modern view of Sheep Creek Valley, former site of Empire, Wyoming. Photo by author.

number of cattle between 1914 and 1918. Wild inflation and extravagant speculation led to a 76 percent increase in Nebraska land values between 1910 and 1920. Banks extended liberal credit on farm mortgages. It seemed that anyone could prosper. Like the whites also flocking to the area, the Speese, Shores, and Taylor families thought themselves well situated to take advantage of the thriving economy.²⁶

They found little evidence of human presence on Spoon Hill Creek. Almost the only trace of human activity north of the huge new Interstate Canal was a rude wagon track along the west bank of Spoon Hill Creek. About two and a half miles north of the Speese homesteads, the ruts intersected the old Fort Laramie to Fort Robinson military trail. The first black settlers in the area had been slaves who worked at an Oregon Trail trading post near the future site of

Torrington—until 1863, when the Sioux killed one or two of them and destroyed the post. The Speeses' immediate predecessor was a black Wisconsin native, Rosengrant Peyton, who was literate and owned his farm free of mortgage. It was said that his homestead developed into "the colored settlement, on [Spoon Hill] creek."²⁷

Otis Taylor and Charles Speese returned to Nebraska in January 1909 to sell the remainder of their land, stock and equipment. The Speese and Taylor clans joined 2,235 blacks and mulattoes in Wyoming, a mere 1.5 percent of the population, of whom more than nine hundred were soldiers. Most civilians lived in Union Pacific railroad towns across the southern part of the state. Only a tiny number of Wyoming blacks were engaged in agriculture, and even fewer worked their own land.

***Their numbers did not shield
the Empire settlers from
racist, hostile neighbors.***

The farming Speeses and Taylors were minorities within minorities. They differed further from the norm by creating a black community. The few black farmers and ranchers in Wyoming were generally scattered on remote homesteads, inspiring one researcher to comment that, "For a Negro to take out a homestead claim and work it was probably to isolate himself in the midst of an unfriendly population." Jim Edwards, "The Greatest Negro Cattle Rancher in All the West,"²⁸ who ranched sixty miles northwest of Empire, acknowledged this situation in creating his brand, the 16 Bar 1, which represented the ratio of white neighbors to himself. The Empire-builders on Spoon Hill Creek did not endure such loneliness.²⁹

Their numbers did not shield the Empire settlers from racist, hostile neighbors. When things disappeared from area farms or ranches, whites tended to assume that one of their black neighbors was the thief. In spring 1909, the Speeses sold sheep and began leasing cow pastures to a prominent man named Yorick Nichols. That amicable business relationship was short-lived; by January 1910 they were embroiled in a series of court cases with Nichols and other white men involving charges and counter charges of theft of hay, stock rustling, and threatening to shoot each other. John W.

Speese, who often served as the family's attorney in these cases, soon began requesting changes of venue because he felt the court in Torrington was "biased and prejudiced." Newspaper accounts sometimes exhibited the same character. Employing an old racial slur and threatening the lynching tactics used in the South, the *Morrill Mail* wrote, "We understand there is to be a 'coon' hunt in this valley. Coons are queer creatures and most anything is 'fish' that comes to their net, especially if their tastes are varied. Its chickens, hen or rooster. Most any old thing looks good to them."³⁰

In spite of some hostility, more black families settled in the area. According to local tradition, another five or ten took up residence near Spoon Hill Creek after 1910. At least seven black homesteads were claimed on the dry lands above, and several places purchased below the Interstate Canal. Almost all the black families were related by blood or marriage. John W. Speese's father-in-law moved to Torrington and found work as a blacksmith. More white families moved into the valley at the same time to take advantage of the same opportunities: free land and the booming agricultural economy.³¹

Most of the Speese and Taylor families finished their houses in late 1909 and early 1910. The new walls and roofs sheltered maturing families—several couples had stopped bearing children before they moved to Wyoming. John and Mary Speese had been married for sixteen years and had two boys and three girls. Joseph and Lizzie had been married seventeen years and had three boys and three girls. Radford and Clara had been married for ten years and were raising two boys and two girls. Charles and Rosetta had produced a son and a daughter in their three years of marriage; they would eventually have seventeen children. Otis and Sarah (Speese) Taylor had been married eight years and had four boys. Maggie (Shores) Taylor died sometime between 1904 and 1908, leaving Baseman to care for their daughter.³²

Susan Speese's grandchildren enjoyed a higher survival rate than had her own children, the first four of whom perished in slavery. Her grandchildren's improved life expectancy probably resulted from their parents' healthier and more plentiful diets and less stressful lives. According to census data, none of Susan's children lost any of their own children. If accurate, this was extraordinary during an era when death haunted every home and nearly every family lost one or more children. The national infant mortality rate in 1900

was one in six. More children commonly died later in childhood so that the loss of one in four or five children was typical.³³

The children and the booming western economy were healthy; their farms and community were still hardscrabble but they were holding on. Moses and Susan's children all owned shares in the roughly seven hundred acres of Nebraska land purchased from Cunningham for \$8,000 with proceeds from the sale of their land and Moses' estate in Custer County. Each nuclear family owned two- to five hundred dollars worth of livestock and personal property in Nebraska except for Otis, who was assessed on goods with a real value of over \$1,000. Excepting Baseman, each branch of the family also paid taxes on cattle, horses, pigs, and miscellaneous property assessed between \$630 and \$1,300 in Wyoming (real value would have been about five times those figures).³⁴

Total assessed value of all the Wyoming property owned by Moses and Susan Speese's sons was \$4,020 (market value would have been about \$20,000). This amount seems paltry until it is recalled that at the close of the Civil War the family had been thrust into the ruined Southern economy with no possessions, few skills, and lacking even the ability to read and write. A half-century after slavery they were healthy, highly educated, and accumulating capital. Nationally, only thirty-seven percent of Americans were able to own their own homes, let alone income-producing agricultural property.³⁵

Otis and Sarah's home was the nicest for miles around. The oldest, original part of the house was built by two white women in the late 1890s. The wall separating its two rooms was on the state line separating Nebraska and Wyoming; the west room was in Wyoming and the east room in Nebraska. Otis Taylor built extensive additions to the west end of the cabin and created a comfortable, unusually large, two-story house with eight rooms, including two upstairs bedrooms. The trees around the house were older than the newly planted saplings on most of the neighbors' places and could even provide some shade in the summer.³⁶

At the bottom of the family spectrum, widowed Baseman Taylor inhabited a shack with only a few acres of land and he had little in the way of tools, livestock, or personal property. His primary income derived from odd jobs and work as a hotel cook. Suffering from poverty and depression, in 1910 he sent daughter Elsie to her maternal grandparents, John W. and Millie Ann Shores, in Halsey, Nebraska, where she remained into the 1920s.³⁷

Several of the women along Spoon Hill Creek claimed land in their own names. Rosetta, Mary, Lizzie, and Susan all claimed ground, as did at least one other black woman, Theodosia Scroggins. That Susan, an aged ex-slave, had a claim of her own is out of the ordinary, though she was not unique. Not far to the north in the Black Hills, at least two elderly, ex-slave women without husbands lived independently on homestead claims of their own. Only Rose and Mary actually patented their claims.³⁸



Russel Taylor at Bellevue College, about 1896. After he came to Empire in 1911, Rev. Taylor became the area's most prominent citizen. Courtesy Hastings College.

The community grew significantly in 1911 when they were joined by forty-year-old Reverend Russel Taylor, his wife, Henrietta, and their children who soon numbered seven. At first, the newcomers lived in the eastern "Nebraska room" in Otis's house, where their youngest son, Paul, was born. Married in Omaha in 1899, they had originally lived in Oklahoma where their first two children were born in 1901 and 1902. They subsequently spent a decade around New Market, Tennessee, where Russel served the Levere Presbytery as a missionary to freed slaves and

their descendants. Russel was exceptionally well educated, having graduated with a bachelor's degree from the Presbyterian Church's Bellevue (Nebraska) College in 1896. He is also believed to have earned a graduate degree, most likely in divinity, possibly from the same institution. Armed with an education, enthusiasm, and boundless energy, he soon became the valley's most prominent citizen—black or white. As preacher, teacher, and postmaster he had a tremendous impact on the lives of the adults and especially on the children of Empire.³⁹



Russel Taylor with Bellevue College's Adelphian Literary Society circa 1896. With a bachelor's degree and probably a graduate degree as well, Rev. Taylor was overqualified to teach at Empire's rural school.
Courtesy Hastings College.

Russel stepped from the train into the tempest. Education had been a primary factor behind the families' departure from Nebraska and remained a paramount issue in Empire. During the 1909–10 school year the community had hired Sallie Thistle, a young black woman from Cheyenne, to teach their one-room country school; she apparently boarded with one of the Speese families. During the spring of 1910, the county school board advertised for bids to erect a new Empire school building. Russel later wrote, "One of the very best buildings in the county among rural schools was provided and furnished. There was an understanding that it could [also] be used for the purpose of

divine worship. Fulfilling the tradition of the race, a Sunday school which had been held in one of the houses was moved into the school."⁴⁰

The Empire residents had hoped that Russel would arrive in the fall of 1910 to assume responsibility for the new school, but when he was delayed in Tennessee the school board hired a local white woman named Miss Daniel. The community protested: they had asked for "a colored teacher." Some apparently "subscribe[d] to the slogan, 'Negro teachers for Negro children'." Russel later explained that in all his years in school, no white teacher or schoolbook had ever taught anything about—indeed were ignorant of—the accomplishments of blacks and their roles in history. Plus, "colored" teachers were needed to provide role models as something other than laborers. He concluded that it was no wonder that people of both races innately doubted "the ability of the Negro as a race." Empire parents demanded a black teacher to help them create a better life, sense of self-worth, and high aspirations for their children. In response, the all-white county school board dismissed Miss Daniel and rehired Miss Thistle to teach the 1910–11 school year.⁴¹

African Americans in Empire turned on its head and took advantage of a discriminatory Wyoming law that read, "When there are fifteen or more Colored children within any school district, the board of directors . . . may provide a separate school for the instruction of such Colored children." The framers intended the law to assist white residents who opposed integrated classrooms and interracial fraternization. Only one other attempt to segregate a Wyoming school is known: in Cheyenne, by white residents whose effort failed.

Russel Taylor finally "took charge" of the school in late 1911. White ranchers today proudly claim that Russel, holding a bachelor's and an advanced degree, was the best-educated teacher in any rural school in the state of Wyoming. Many barely possessed a high school diploma; some lacked even that qualification. Not content to rest on his laurels, Taylor attended at least one Wyoming State Teachers' Institute to further his own education. Under his tutelage, the segregated Empire school did not refuse admission to white children. Whether to take advantage of his impressive qualifications or because of the proximity of the schoolhouse, white children named Hill began to attend classes, but other white families would not enroll their children. One neighbor seems to have spoken for the group when he refused to send his offspring "to a school where a nigger could tell

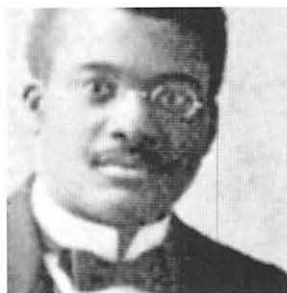
them what to do," even a black teacher as over-qualified as Russel Taylor. The Hill family soon succumbed to social pressure and transferred their children to a school with a white teacher.⁴²

Russel spent the summer of 1912 back in New Market, Tennessee, but returned in the fall to find twenty-two eager students waiting to resume their studies. The Empire school under Russel Taylor was perhaps unique in that blacks created a segregated school in which "separate but equal" meant the black students actually received a better education than their white neighbors.

About 1915 or 1916 Empire began to dissolve as some black families sold their original places and moved below the canal, where they thought they could farm with greater success. At the same time Rad and Charles Speese, and possibly other parents, began to oppose keeping Russel as the Empire teacher, though Joe Speese and the Taylor brothers supported him. He was replaced by Rose Hutchinson, a black woman from Kansas. Seizing an opportunity, the leading patron of the "Nash" school, south of the ditch, eagerly invited Taylor to come teach there. After long consideration of racial issues, which Russel described as worse in some ways in rural than in urban areas, he agreed to make the move. A white parent objected that white students "could not understand the language of Colored people!" Another further outraged the cultured and sophisticated Taylor by stating that "in no case should Colored persons be allowed to teach white children for it mattered not how well educated he might be, the Colored man would use improper English such as "dis," "dare," "dat," etc.!" Taylor suggested that the man was partially motivated by jealousy, that it "didn't look good to him for a Negro to be sitting in a school room drawing a salary while white men were in the hay field and potato patch drawing wages." After one year, Russel returned to the Empire school.⁴³

Russel Taylor's public school curriculum, like many in that era, did not abide by provisions separating church and state. A Presbyterian publication noted, "A colony of colored people was organized into a church, known as Grace Church of Sheep Creek. Their pastor is also the school teacher, so piety and learning go hand in hand, the new schoolhouse serving for church purposes."⁴⁴

Russel's next major accomplishment was to obtain a post office so the Spoon Hill settlement became a legal entity. The name selected harkens back to the Jeffersonian dream of a continental nation and John Adams's dramatic



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words in his 1802 oration at Plymouth: *Empire*. The immediate inspiration, however, was Cunningham's Empire Investment Company that enticed the settlers to Spoon Hill Creek. Cunningham had, in fact, previously operated a post office named Empire, Nebraska, from 1906 to 1911.⁴⁵

The new Empire, Wyoming, Post Office was a fourth-class office that began operations on April 10, 1912, with Russel Taylor as postmaster. This Wyoming post office had an unusual and probably illegal quirk: it was in Nebraska, where Russel lived in the easternmost, "Nebraska room" of the original two rooms in Otis Taylor's residence. Several people—including Rad Speese, Otis Taylor, and Rose Peyton—earned some cash by hauling the mail from Torrington. They also carried light freight and provided limited stagecoach services between Empire and Torrington using teams and wagons. Russel's annual compensation was based largely on stamp receipts and the amount of box rents collected, but could not exceed \$1,000. Postmasters at inactive offices were paid as little as \$100. No records exist of Taylor's salary, but it was probably near the lower end of the scale. The Empire Post Office apparently remained in Otis's house even after Russel moved into his own home.⁴⁶

Russel was preoccupied with community-building issues more than family matters. He did not acquire a home of his own until the spring of 1913, when he finally filed on a claim three fourths of a mile into Wyoming, immediately west of his



brother Otis's place and just south of John Speese's. The following fall he claimed more land, for a total of 321 acres that were patented in November 1917. Henrietta claimed 200 acres that were not patented. Their residence, a combination soddy and dugout, was simple for an influential and cultured man, but a typical first dwelling on a prairie homestead even so far into the twentieth century. After cramming the whole family into one room of his brother's house for so long, everyone probably breathed a sigh of relief and got along much better with separate accommodations. With their father preoccupied by community building the children sometimes had little supervision; in July 1916 while Russel Jr. and Theodosia were hunting he shot himself in the arm. The incident was noted in the *Omaha Monitor*, illustrating Russel Taylor's prominence all across Nebraska.⁴⁷

Russel Taylor was also the key figure in another important 1912 development. He organized thirty founding members to create Grace Presbyterian Church. He served throughout the eight-year life of the church as a "stated-supply" pastor, which meant the church hierarchy did not regard him as a permanent pastor. He was considered a missionary and his salary was paid by the Board of Home Missions rather than from tithing by his cash-poor congregation. He also chaired the Presbyterian Freedmen's' Bureau and personally ministered to former slaves and their descendants in various parts of the nation. These trips often took Russel away from home and his flock for extended periods. During these times there were probably no regular services at Grace, a situation

The congregation of the integrated Haycraft Baptist Church, sometimes referred to as Sheep Creek Baptist Church of God. Photo provided by author.

that may have encouraged some worshippers to seek other congregations.⁴⁸

Initially, services were held in members' homes and later in the schoolhouse. In 1915 the Grace congregation finally acquired sufficient funds to erect the first church building in the valley. The simple structure was not centrally located; it was situated a mile north of Otis Taylor's house on a high point overlooking the recently renamed Sheep Creek Valley. In an effort to serve the whole length of the valley, on at least one occasion in August 1915, services were held in the Chalk Buttes School about six miles south of Otis Taylor's place. This service may have been a proactive attempt to unify area faithful and prevent the splintering and repetitive formation of new congregations that fatally bled members and financial support from so many rural churches.

The year 1916 saw the creation of two competing congregations. Reverend Haycraft, a white minister who had also moved to the area from Westerville, founded the integrated Haycraft Baptist Church, also called the Sheep Creek Baptist Church of God, a few miles south of Otis Taylor's place. Haycraft had been an associate of Jerry Shores's son-in-law, Albert Marks, who was still a preacher in Custer County. Several members of the Speese and Taylor families worshiped at Haycraft's convenient location, but possibly only when Russel was away.⁴⁹

A Reverend Currens established a third integrated congregation, the Sheep Creek Presbyterian Church, on the Nebraska side of the border. Currens, a white Presbyterian Home Missions pastor for Nebraska, had been competing to recruit white and black residents of Empire since at least 1912. He enticed them by offering wage labor on his Nebraska homestead.⁵⁰ This newest church was part of the Presbytery of Nebraska and not bureaucratically related to Grace Church, which was part of the Presbytery of Cheyenne, Wyoming. This third church siphoned still more Speeses and Taylors from Russel's Grace Church congregation. Among them was Joe Speese who, according to apparently inaccurate tradition, donated land for the Sheep Creek Church and cemetery when the need arose to provide a burial place for his sister and Otis Taylor's wife, Sarah. A church building was erected east of the state border and a mile or so farther south of the Baptist Church in late 1917 and dedicated in June 1918.⁵¹

The initial thirty-member Grace Church congregation somehow managed to keep two hundred dollars in reserve for repairs and miscellaneous necessities. One year it even collected ten dollars for mission programs. In spite of stiff competition from the new congregations, Grace's membership increased to forty-four in 1916, when nine people were baptized.⁵²

Under Russel's guidance, the black families of Empire found solace and strength in the celebration of their Christian faith and in each other. Secular and religious music remained an important part of their academic and community life in Empire, as it had been in Nebraska. Many individuals excelled in both vocal and instrumental forms of this art. Musical training started at home. The Grace Church choir, christened "The Jubilee Singers," was in demand all around the area. After east central Wyoming was organized as Goshen County, the Singers performed at the exciting 1913 dedication of the new county courthouse in Torrington, just a few months prior to Baseman's death at the hands of the county sheriff. They also sang at the dedication for the Berge Church in Prairie Center. The Red Cloud, Wyoming, Union Presbyterian Church paid them three dollars to cover travel expenses for singing at that church's dedication in August 1917. The audience included five ministers and two hundred others.⁵³

Russel was periodically called upon to perform a minister's sad duty of burying the dead. With a congregation comprised of so many relatives, this task was doubly difficult. Among the first to perish

was his brother Baseman in 1913. John W. Speese, who had been forced by cataracts to give up his law practice, died in 1915, but was apparently buried elsewhere. Otis and Sarah Speese Taylor's infant daughter died that same year. Later in 1915, Sarah delivered another baby girl they named Leota, who grew up and enjoyed a long life. Sarah died about a year later, possibly in a buggy accident near the Sheep Creek bridge. The infant and



Jubilee singers at Lexington Business College, Lexington, Nebraska, in 1909. Members of the Speese and Shores families were renowned as musicians. NSHS RG2608-766-5

Sarah are buried beside each other in the Sheep Creek Presbyterian cemetery. White farmers and ranchers were buried in other parts of the cemetery in subsequent years, so Sarah and the baby are segregated from the rest, but locals insist this had nothing to do with race. Rose Peyton was among the last of Empire's African American residents to be buried in the area after he succumbed during the summer of 1919 to "a hemorrhage of the lungs."⁵⁴

Of all the Empire deaths, Baseman Taylor's was particularly traumatic. He had become paranoid and threatening to family and neighbors, who asked the court to declare him incompetent and send him for treatment to the state "Hospital for the Insane." Though Basemen offered

no resistance, the Goshen County sheriff used excessive force to take him into custody and apparently caused a head injury. Within hours Baseman began suffering seizures. According to Russel's wrongful death suit and white witnesses, the sheriff, his deputies, and another prisoner subsequently "did beat, burn, choke, pinch, abuse and otherwise misuse" Baseman Taylor. Because the new county had no jail, prisoners were kept in the Torrington Hotel and Baseman's torment was a public spectacle. People staying at the hotel described watching his attackers choke him in the lobby because he refused to be silent. Later they went upstairs to look through the open doorway of the room in which the helpless Baseman was shackled hand and foot in a bed during continued abuse. Apparent damage to his trachea from repeated choking seems to have interfered with his breathing. On November 6, after three days of torture, Baseman Taylor died, leaving his nine-year-old daughter an orphan.

His death was a lynching, an illegal killing by a group acting under the pretext of serving justice. Baseman's infraction, according to the sheriff, was that he was "a crazy nigger." The local newspaper reported the incident as though his death resulted from preexisting medical or neurological conditions. The authorities did not prosecute the sheriff, and Russel eventually dropped his suit when his attorneys informed him that "recovery . . . was apt to be small and of little value." A black man's life wasn't worth much in the Equality State. This horrific event sparked Empire residents' loss of trust in the Wyoming legal system and underscored their status as second-class citizens in the same year that the Wyoming legislature unanimously passed legislation making interracial marriage a felony. The Equality State, like other states during this troubled era, was preparing to "keep the niggers in their place."⁵⁵

In most ways, the lives of African American settlers at Empire differed little from those of their white contemporaries. Most people lived in soddies or dugouts. They worked hard tending stock and planting small grains, corn, potatoes, and other crops. "They raised what they knew." The families helped each other during busy seasons including branding, haying, and harvest. They held community-wide Thanksgiving and Christmas services and socials at the church/school house. Many social events were mentioned in a local newspaper column called the "Empire Eyelets," which did not bother to note—pro or con—that many events were integrated. Multihued crowds

gathered at the Otis Taylor place on the Fourth of July during the annual community picnic for all area residents. Using winter-cut ice preserved in their ice house, Otis made ice-cream for the throng. The guests provided the rest of the food. Adults enjoyed the rare treat of being able to relax beneath shade trees while children raced around playing in the summer sunshine.⁵⁶

There is no evidence of organized harassment, though an active Ku Klux Klan organization existed in Torrington during this era when the Klan was one of the most potent forces in the U.S. and the West. The local Klan seems to have focused most of its attention on Catholics. Local tradition recalls an "unspoken rule" that blacks should do their shopping at night rather than darken business district sidewalks during the daylight hours, but evidence indicates that black shoppers traded freely when and where they chose. Stores in other Wyoming communities displayed window signs proclaiming "No Indians, No Negroes, No Mexicans," but African Americans' money was welcome in Torrington day and night. Stores stayed open late Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, called "Farmer Nights," so that all area farmers, regardless of race, could come to town and shop after chores were completed.⁵⁷

Conflict occasionally originated around the hearth when times were hard and nerves frayed. One family imbroglio became public in 1914 when John Speese's wife, Mary, initiated legal proceedings against Otis Taylor for driving her cattle "from their home range." Joe, who testified in Otis's behalf, Radford, and Charles all became embroiled in the feud. Tempers flared again four days later when Otis pressed charges against Rad for "uttering and using [*sic*] obscene and licentious language in the presence of Sarah Taylor, a female." Sarah, of course, was Radford's sister and Otis's wife.⁵⁸

To help make ends meet, several Empire residents took on outside work. This was typical throughout Wyoming where marginally productive land mandated that many homestead families bring in cash from somewhere. One old maxim maintained that, "behind every successful rancher there's a school teacher" with a regular paycheck. None of the black women in Empire were teachers, but they did their part to support their families. Like ranch-wives all across the West, they raised poultry, eggs, and dairy products for their own tables and for sale to purchase food, clothes, and other objects the families needed. Sarah Speese Taylor tried to generate some income doing twice weekly laundry for men and small families, though

the newspaper ad credited Otis for this work. Most of the income men generated producing crops and livestock was plowed back into the homestead. The only Empire residents known to have had wage-labor jobs were men. John Speese worked as an attorney and land locator. Several men carried the mail to the Empire post office. Some of the Taylor men built and plastered houses. Rad Speese is mentioned frequently as a builder and helped build one of the few two-story sod houses in Nebraska on the nearby Grewell homestead. Joe Speese purchased a well-drilling outfit in 1910, and a few years later his son, Miles, was praised in the newspaper for "making a good record as a young well maker."⁵⁹

DECLINE AND FALL By all appearances, Empire seemed to be progressing on the road from ragged frontier agricultural neighborhood to an established rural community. Yet, in 1915, after Empire had acquired its post office, school, and church and the national ag economy continued to boom, something happened that his-

torical perspective reveals was the beginning of the end of Empire. In November, after managing to raise only two crops during all their years in Wyoming, Charles and Rosetta Speese took their children and moved away.⁶⁰

They returned to Nebraska and settled near DeWitty in Cherry County, where her parents and many other relatives and friends from Blaine, Custer, and Dawson Counties had been moving since 1907. They wrote back to Empire that the homes in Nebraska had wood, not dirt floors. The comparatively wealthy Nebraska community was much larger, thus offering an expanded social life, more political power, and increased potential for the children to find spouses of their own race. Nearly eighty families numbering almost two hundred people had homesteads along fifteen miles of the North Loup River. Three entire school districts had only black pupils, while several others

While he was living in Empire, Radford Speese built a stuccoed, story-and-a-half sod house at a nearby Sioux County, Nebraska, ranch. Shown here in a modern photo, the house continues to serve as a residence. Photo by Roger Bruhn.



***Empire's dry land farmers
watched as the plowed topsoil
dried up and blew away.***

were integrated. One of the teachers was Rosetta's brother, Dennis Mehan, another was Esthly Shores. Life in Nebraska was better than it was in Empire.⁶¹

Back in Empire, desperate environmental, social, and economic factors were combining to crush dreams as they did to thousands of white homesteaders all across the West. Lacking irrigation available below the Interstate Canal, Empire's dry land farmers watched as the plowed topsoil dried out and blew away. The farming techniques they had learned during their decades in central Nebraska failed in this drier, sandier area. The carrying capacity of their unplowed rangeland was barely suitable even for grazing. In the late 1890s, when climatic conditions were more favorable than during the 1910s and 1920s, each cow still required about thirty-two acres to survive. Raising enough cattle to support a family required a tremendous amount of land—vastly more than any of them owned. The black families that founded Empire lacked enough land and water to prosper even during the World War I-era boom times. Around 1916 several families sold out and moved below the Interstate Canal to start over. Summer drought in 1919 and terrible winter storms in early 1920 aggravated their plights.

At the same time Empire residents were confronting the realities of an environment hostile to farming, Wyoming race relations turned deadly. What may have seemed an aberration in 1912 when a black prisoner was lynched inside the Wyoming State Penitentiary, was followed in 1913 by Baseman Taylor's lynching and Wyoming's anti-miscegenation law. A growing national trend of racism and increasing KKK power was also extant in Wyoming. In 1917 a white mob lynched a black man in Rock Springs. The next year a mob in Green River dragged a black man from jail and lynched him. In 1919 or 1920 another black man was lynched in Hudson. The local authorities' general attitude after the lynchings was that "the nigger got what he deserved." African Americans in Empire and across Wyoming lived in fear. These incidents were not cases of rough frontier justice. Wyoming had achieved statehood in 1890 and had a well-established judicial system, but it was clear

that neither Wyoming law nor their white neighbors would guarantee to protect citizens of color in Empire or anywhere else in the state.

In response to the lynchings, Russel Taylor wrote to a Cheyenne newspaper that racism was a chronic problem in Wyoming. He stated that he was consistently denied admission to restaurants and hotels and had to settle for places that were "of little credit to a minister." While Joe and Lizzie Speese's oldest son, Miles, was wearing the uniform of his country in World War I, Russel and another pastor wrote to express African Americans' frustration that the United States would fight for democracy abroad without ensuring that justice was served at home.⁶²

People in Empire wondered what to do. In spite of Charles and Rose Speese's letters, they knew that Nebraska was not a panacea. The same economic and environmental issues the families encountered in Wyoming plagued them in Nebraska. And there was racism. The Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in Dunning's public park for the benefit of Taylor and Speese relatives living there. The 1919 lynching of a black Omahan precipitated wild rioting and destruction by white mobs. Mob arson burned a black restaurant in North Platte. Crosses were burned in other western Nebraska communities and blacks were justifiably fearful. Shortly after the Omaha riot, whites in Scottsbluff mobbed the home of a black family to protest the rumored opening of a boarding house for blacks by the Rev. Russel Taylor. New sugar beet plants were under construction, and local whites were determined to prevent another influx of blacks like that which had brought many transient southern black laborers into the community during construction of the big irrigation projects a decade earlier. The mob's goal was to make sure "that no more colored people were to be permitted to locate in that neighborhood." Russel wrote to the paper that he was not the buyer of the building and called the incident a "tempest in a teapot." He suggested that white people were afraid that low class blacks were fleeing Omaha and North Platte for rural destinations like Scottsbluff. In his ongoing effort to build esteem for his people and bridge chasms between the races, he stated, "Our investigations failed to show that such was the case." He felt that "little if any difference is found between the moral status of this new influx of Negroes and those found in [Scottsbluff] when beginning our religious work last April." Two years later, perhaps in an effort to head off a similar confrontation in

Omaha, Russel was associated with the Colored Commercial Club, a sort of black chamber of commerce and employment bureau which, "By cooperating with Labor Bureaus in the East and South [was] able to keep out of Omaha a great number of floaters" seeking work but who were deemed undesirable by established, resident African Americans.⁶³

Many Empire settlers clung to their homes in spite of environmental and social problems but after World War I economic factors finally destroyed their tenuous holds on their marginal land. As soon as the war ended, prices for goods they produced plummeted, while payments on mortgages and loans remained fixed at high wartime rates. Tens of thousands of homestead families all around the West began to walk off their land into poverty-stricken futures, abandoning their mortgages and driving hundreds of banks into failure. There was no shame in giving up and leaving during this terrible era; the disintegration of Empire was part of a huge national collapse. Farm prices dropped sixty percent, but production decreased only six percent, which resulted in huge surpluses of unmarketable produce. In 1920 steers sold for \$150 per head; by 1924 they were down to \$60. Nationwide, net farm income plunged from a total of nearly \$10 billion in 1919 to \$4 billion in 1921. Of forty-seven national banks in Wyoming in 1921, twenty-three were out of business before the crash of 1929. Of 133 state and private banks in Wyoming during the early 1920s, seventy-six closed by 1927 and only thirty-two still survived in 1936. There was no market for what little the Empire farmers and ranchers could produce, and no credit to keep them going.⁶⁴

The fall of Empire came as quickly as its rise. Barely able to hold on during the best of times, Empire farmers and ranchers were blown away in a maelstrom that dwarfed Dorothy's Kansas tornado without offering a green and fertile Oz at the other end of the rainbow. The family-oriented black residents in Empire could not care adequately for their children or pay their taxes. Dry land farmers above the canal and those farther west—the driest parts of the area—left first, followed in short order by nearly everyone else. The Grace Church congregation declined to only fourteen members and disbanded in 1920; the Haycraft Baptist and Sheep Creek Presbyterian Churches also withered and died. The Empire post office closed on August 14, 1920.

A few diehards tried desperately to hang on as Empire collapsed around them. Joe and Lizzie's

Nearly everyone, regardless of color, had fled Empire and scattered in the prairie winds.

son, Miles Speese, returned home from World War I full of youthful energy and optimism and succeeded in patenting 200 acres of land in 1923. But by the mid 1920s, even the stragglers had to admit defeat and abandoned the Sheep Creek Valley. Nearly everyone, regardless of color, had fled Empire and scattered in the prairie winds; only about one out of every twenty-five settlers, white or black, managed to stay. With the exception of the Otis Taylor place, the abandoned Speese, Taylor, and Shores homesteads were not reoccupied. Scavengers from the few surviving ranches salvaged what they could from the deserted buildings, then left the remainder to fall into ruin. Sod walls crumbled, boards blew off the roofs, cattle wandered through vacant doorways, and forlorn barns collapsed under the weight of winter snows. Little evidence remains of the dreams and determination that grew out of generations of slavery but became nightmares during the earliest days of the Great Depression. Today, Empire is essentially an archaeological site.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the population of the rural West was denser than today, as thousands of families tried to survive on little homesteads that have since been absorbed by larger operations. A small percentage of those pioneers were African Americans who lived in places where blacks are unlikely to appear today. Many of these settlers, like their white neighbors, were driven from their farms by environmental and economic factors during the 1920s and 1930s. Given the demographics of the times, it is no wonder that Empire disappeared. But in spite of everything, the families of the Empire builders, like the nation they helped create, survive. Some of the descendants look back on their lives in Wyoming and western Nebraska with shudders. Others remember those times fondly and with pride. The prolific family historian and optimist, Ava Speese Day, a daughter of Charles and Rose Speese, acknowledged economic hardships but ignored racism to pen a rose-hued summary of their lives,

There wasn't much money—ever—but our folks did their best to give us the best they possibly could—and I feel we had a wonderful childhood . . . My husband—Missouri born—raised in S. Dakota without segregation—still can't get over how nice the white people in the Sandhills & Wyoming were to us in 1960 [and during visits as late as the 1980s]. *I told him it had always been like that—neighbors; like people think the word really means.*⁶⁵

Most of the people who abandoned Empire returned to Nebraska. But just as Odysseus returned to a changed home not to his liking, in which he had to fight to regain his place, they continued to face adversity through succeeding generations. Though they did not yet know it, the agrarian phase of the Empire builders' odyssey was over. During the tumult of the Depression some families, like many of their white counterparts, moved from farm to farm, fighting a losing battle to stay on the land before succumbing to urban life. The next phase of their odyssey would be lived out in Midwestern towns and cities during the hard times of the Great Depression and World War II.

With the passage of time, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Moses and Susan Speese, the Shores and Taylor families, spread across the continent, farther and farther from their ancestors' dreams of tilling free soil in the West, but still searching for safe and decent places to raise their children and pursue their dreams. As in any family, some succeeded in the endeavors they chose; others struggled just to make ends meet.⁶⁶

The star of Empire first shone in the rhetoric of the Founding Fathers during an era when much of the nation—the American Empire—was being built on the scarred backs of slaves who dreamed of freedom and land of their own. Those ex-slave families who pursued Adams's "star" to the Nebraska-Wyoming border found the West to be anything but the garden that Jefferson and others imagined. In Nebraska they lacked the financial resources to establish their next generation as farmers; in Wyoming environmental, economic, and social conditions conspired to crush their agrarian aspirations. And yet, they contributed to the creation and development of new communities and states even while their own farm homes and dreams crumbled into dust during the Great Depression. The people who built Empire were nation-builders, first as slaves and later as freedmen and women. ❧

Those ex-slave families who pursued Adams's "star" to the Nebraska-Wyoming border found the West to be anything but the garden that Jefferson and others imagined.

¹ Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 18; *John Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, 16th ed. (New York: Little Brown and Co., 1992), 296.

² The aftermath of Reconstruction and the migration of ex-slaves from the South to the Great Plains is discussed in Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction*, (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1977); Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas 1879–1880* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978); Norman L. Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979); Nebraska Writers' Project, *The Negroes of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Works Progress Administration, 1940); Gregory D. Kendrick, ed., *Promised Land on the Solomon: Black Settlement at Nicodemus, Kansas* (Topeka: National Park Service and Kansas State Historical Society, 1986); James Rose Harvey, "Negroes in Colorado" (master's thesis, University of Denver, 1941); and Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), chap. 5, "Migration and Settlement, 1875–1920," 134–63.

³ Michael A. Massie, "Reform is Where You Find It: The Roots of Woman Suffrage in Wyoming," *Annals of Wyoming* 62 (Spring 1990): 7–9; T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 78–94. Wyoming in 1869 was the first state or territory to grant women the right to vote, hold political office, and own property, developments that inspired the nickname, "The Equality State." Esther Morris, a woman in Bright's hometown of South Pass City, was appointed justice of the peace in 1870 and became the first woman officeholder in the nation.

⁴ Elsie and Cecil Rose, interview by author at the Rose Ranch on Sheep Creek (formerly Spoon Hill Creek), Wyoming, Oct. 4, 1988. The Roses ranch and farm on land that encompasses much of what was formerly the Empire community. Their home is on the site of Otis Taylor's ranchhouse. They have lived in the area for many years and are familiar with the community's history. See also *Morrill (Nebr.) Mail*, Aug. 27, 1908; Ava Speese Day, fifteen-page abstract of twenty-eight page unpublished manuscript submitted to Lavonia Foster, December 1978, on file, Custer County Historical Society Museum, Broken Bow, Nebraska, 13; *Gering (Nebr.) Courier*, "Torrington" column, Nov. 1, 1907.

Cunningham was not the fly-by-night promoter one might suspect from this account. He had settled in the area earlier, believed in the potential of the region, and intended to stay and raise his own family. Any deception was apparently done on his own faith that the Spoon Hill area possessed farming potential and he hoped to build up the area with good, hardworking people regardless of race. His descendants still live nearby.

According to the Roses, many transient, unmarried black men labored on construction of the Interstate Canal. There is evidence that a southern construction company helped build the Pathfinder irrigation system on the Wyoming-Nebraska border and brought a crew of black laborers to the area around 1905 to 1915. They lived in the construction camps that moved from place to place as the ditch progressed. Canal projects were similar to railroad construction in that workers did not live in permanent towns. See "Rough, Tumble Ditch Camps Provided Plenty of Business for Pioneer Doctor, Anna A. Cole," *Scottsbluff (Nebr.) Star-Herald*, clipping, n.d. (fall 1968?), xerographic copy in author's collection.

⁵ U.S. Census, Yadkin County, North Carolina, 1870, entry for Moses Shores. Even descendants are confused by the family genealogy and not all sources agree that all these men were brothers, though the most reliable indicate that this was the case. For example, Moses Speese's daughter-in-law, Rosetta

Meehan Speese, said incorrectly in 1964, according to Ava Speese Day, Mar. 28, 1964, letter to the Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter NSHS) filed in Mrs. Lee (Ava) Day Mss, B983-1345, that John Wesley and Jerry Shores had been owned by the same master, but were not related to Moses Speese, though she also implies that John Wesley and Moses were brothers. The most reliable source for early family history is "Heirs of Moses Speese, Appellees, v. Estate of Jeremiah Shores, Appellant, Case No. 15,101, Vol. 81, *Reports of Cases in the Supreme Court of Nebraska*, January 1908 term (Lincoln: State Journal Co., 1909), 593-97, (hereafter cited as *Nebraska Reports*). See also U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910; Margaret Speese, Casper, Wyo., interview by author, Feb. 20, 1991; John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher: Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 43; and Ava Speese Day Mss, 6, 8. Jeremiah's tombstone gives 1818 as his date of birth which, if accurate, indicates that he was some twenty years older than Moses. Numerous sources help to illuminate the Speese and Shores families' antebellum existence in slavery including Frances H. Casstevens, *The Civil War and Yadkin County, North Carolina* (Jefferson, N. Car.: McFarland and Co., 1997), chaps. 5 and 6, 106, 116, 261-64.

⁶ Ava Speese Day Mss, 6 and Day contribution in Frances Jacobs Alberts, ed., *Sod House Memories: A Treasury of Soddy Stories*, (n.p.: Sod House Society, 1972), 262.

⁷ Various official, published, and family sources provide conflicting birthdates for Moses, Susan, and their children. The dates provided here are based on all available information and are as nearly accurate as possible. See also U.S. Census, K Precinct, Seward County, Nebraska, 1880; Yadkin County, North Carolina, 1870; Custer and Blaine counties, Nebraska, 1900, 1910; Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910; and Goshen County, Wyoming, 1920, 1930; Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, 1911, vol. 3, 137 (School District #11), Laramie County, Wyoming Treasurer's Office. Joseph Speese's obituary in *The (Omaha) Monitor*, Jan. 14, 1927, for example, gives his birthdate as Jan. 26, 1876, which is clearly erroneous, as is the purported location of his birth, "Yachet," North Carolina—apparently substituted for Yadkin County. See also Ava Speese Day in Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, 262; Ava Speese Day Mss., 6, 9, 10.

⁸ Ava Speese Day Mss., 6, 7; Casstevens, *The Civil War and Yadkin County*, chaps. 5 and 6, 65, 107, 111, 115, 152.

⁹ Ava Speese Day Mss., 7, 8. Conflicting dates for Sarah's birth are given in the Ava Speese Day Mss and in the U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910, house 218; Elmer Harvey oral information re.: Butcher photo of Shores family, given to NSHS photograph section, Jan. 4, 1966, type-script notes on file.

¹⁰ Margaret Speese interview; Ava Speese Day Mss., 7; U.S. Census, K Precinct, Seward County, Nebraska, 1880; *The Monitor*, Aug. 31, 1923.

¹¹ 1885 Nebraska Census of Agriculture, cited in "Stories of the Great Westward Expansion-African American History in Your National Parks, The Moses Speese Family: New Years, New Lives," website address, www.nps.gov/untold/banners_and_backgrounds/expansionbanner/speese.htm, p. 4 of 4.

¹² Ava Speese Day Mss., 7; Phillip Gardner, "Speeses—Shores—Marks," in *Centennial History of Westerville* (n.p.: n.d.), 307; Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 20.

¹³ According to one source, Jerry Shores came to Nebraska alone and married Rachel Williams there in 1884; they had actually enjoyed a long-standing common-law or "slave marriage" that was finally made legal in Nebraska. Rachel was originally from Smyth County, South Carolina. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher*, 43; Lela Speese Avery (daughter of Charles and Rosetta Speese), letter to author, May 20, 1991; Margaret Speese interview. A later photo of the Shores by an unknown photographer was dated about 1892 by family historian Ava Speese Day.

¹⁴ Phyllis Cannon Wirz, "Cannon, Elmer, and Floy Cannon Leach, Westerville, Nebraska," in Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, 210.

¹⁵ Ava Speese Day Mss, 9.

¹⁶ "Lincoln" column, *The (Omaha) Enterprise*, Nov. 16, Nov. 30, and Dec. 7, 1895; Sept. 5, 1896; Tabor College records curated in the Doane College (Crete, Nebr.) Library reveal that the Speese brothers earned good grades in serious courses of study and it appears that only Henry graduated, in 1895; Theodore Caplow, Louis Hicks, Ben J. Wattenberg, *The First Measured Century: An Illustrated Guide to Trends in America, 1900-2000* (Washington, D.C.: AEI Press, 2001), 52, 53.

¹⁷ *Ord (Nebr.) Journal*, Jan. 10 and 17, 1896; *St. Paul (Nebr.) Phonograph*, Jan. 10 and 17, 1896; *Alliance (Nebr.) Times*, Jan. 21, 1896.

¹⁸ Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, 208, 209; Ava Speese Day Mss., 2, 9; "Westerville Items," *Custer County (Nebr.) Chief*, Jan. 31, 1896; "Westerville Items," *Ansley (Nebr.) Chronicle*, May 16, 1902; *Brewster (Nebr.) News*, June 26 and July 3, 1903.

¹⁹ Ava Speese Day Mss., 8, 9; *Ansley Chronicle-Citizen*, May 10, 1907.

²⁰ Family origins, dates and places of birth and marriage of the Speese children and their spouses are found in Ava Speese Day Mss., 1, 10, 11, 12, with additional information extrapolated from the U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910; Margaret Speese interview; Lela Speese Avery letter to author; photocopy of unidentified (Omaha?) newspaper clipping about Hester Meehan provided to author by Lela Speese Avery; Charles Reece, *History of Cherry County, Nebraska* (Simeon, Nebr.: n.p., 1945), 93-94; Don Hanna, Jr., "Brownlee" and "DeWitty Community, the Negro Settlement," and Ava Speese Day, "St. James RMC Church and Cemetery" in Marianne Brinda Beel, ed., *A Sandhill Century: An Early History of Cherry County, Nebraska, Book II, The People, 1883-1983* (Cherry County Centennial Committee, 1986), 243-47.

²¹ "Dunning Dew Drops," *Brewster News*, Jan. 25 and May 3, 1901, Jan. 31, 1902, Feb. 27 and June 5, 1903; Oct. 18, 1907; U.S. Census, Blaine County, Nebraska, 1910.

²² Many family members had shares in the nearly 700 acres of Nebraska land; Joe did not have sole title. *Brewster News*, Oct. 18 and Nov. 8, 1907, Feb. 12 and June 19, 1908; *Ansley Chronicle-Citizen*, Sept. 27, 1907; *Omaha Bee*, Apr. 29, 1907; *Mitchell (Nebr.) Index*, June 26, 1908; Sioux County (Nebr.) Clerk's Office, Book M, 443; Russel Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News From the Rural West," *The (Omaha) Monitor*, Apr. 12, 1919.

On May 10, 1907, the *Brewster News* reported that a B & M RR emigration agent who encouraged the Speeses to move to Spoon Hill Creek was working to create a "negro colony" called DeWitty in Cherry County. Several of the Shores moved there, as did the family of Charles Speese's future wife, Rose Meehan. Rose, a capable sixteen-year-old farm girl, drove one of her father's wagons from central Nebraska to their new home during the summer of 1907, then turned around to join Charles in Westerville for their wedding.

According to Charles Barron McIntosh in *The Nebraska Sandhills: The Human Landscape* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 230, 231, Charles Speese's in-laws, the Charles Meehans, were not, contrary to some assertions, the first African American family to claim land west of Brownlee in what would become DeWitty. The first was LeRoy Gields in 1902. In 1906 three more black homesteads were claimed, then eleven in 1907, the year the Meehans arrived, followed by three more in 1908, and six each in 1909 and 1910. In 1911 additional black homesteads were claimed, bringing the total to forty-four. Eventually, seventy-four total claims were filed. For information on DeWitty and other black communities, see, "Neighborhood Notes," *Brewster News*, May 10, 1907; Kathryn L. Lichy, "A



History of the Settlement of the Nebraska Sandhills," (master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1960); Andrew Harris, "Deerfield, a Negro Ghost Town in Weld County, Colorado," *The Negro History Bulletin* 27 (1963): 38–39; James Rose Harvey, "Negroes in Colorado;" Rheba Massey, et al., "Historic Survey of the Townsite of Deerfield, Colorado," contract report submitted to Colorado Historical Society, 1985; Brian L. Werner, "Colorado's Pioneer Blacks: Migration, Occupations, and Race Relations in the Centennial State" (honors thesis, University of Northern Colorado 1979); Nebraska Writers' Project, *The Negroes of Nebraska*.

²³ *Nebraska Reports*, 593–97.

²⁴ Ava Speese Day Mss., 13; *Ansley (Nebr.) Argosy*, Dec. 26, 1907, Feb. 27, 1908, Mar. 5, 12, and 19, 1908; *Brewster News*, June 19 and July 31, 1908; *Mitchell Index*, Nov. 16 and 23, 1906, Feb. 7, 1908; *Torrington (Wyo.) Telegram*, Nov. 6, 1913; R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News;" *Torrington Telegram*, Feb. 3, 1910.

²⁵ Rose interview; U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910. Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, Vol. 3, 137, 157, includes figures on length of residency and year of arrival. See also Ava Speese Day Mss., 1, 13; Ava Speese Day, Christmas letter, 1981, fourteen-page typed manuscript on file, NSHS photo section, 5; *Brewster News*, Jan. 17, 1908.

²⁶ U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910. His name elsewhere is spelled variously Bozeman, Boseman, Baseman, Base, and Baise. See also Ava Speese Day Mss., 11. T. A. Larson, *Wyoming: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 134; Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 346–411; James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 287, 288; John T. Schlebecker, *Cattle Raising on the Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 51; Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage in the Public Domain, 1776–1970* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 363–87; Skylar S. Scott, "Historical Overview of the Stock Raising Frontier," in David Reiss, et al., "Results of a Class III Inventory on the Deer Creek Reservoir, Converse and Natrona Counties, Wyoming," unpublished contract archaeology report on file at the Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist, Laramie, 1986; Laurie K. Mercier, "Women's Economic Role in Montana Agriculture: 'You Had To Make Every Minute Count,'" *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38 (Autumn 1988): 51.

²⁷ T. B. Snyder settled on Sheep Creek in 1881 and sold his ranch to Hiram Lingle about 1905, who soon sold to Cunningham. The latter established a Nebraska post office called Empire in 1906. Cunningham sold part of "the old Snyder ranch on Sheep Creek" to "the colored people," the "Speese Brothers." *Mitchell Index*, Nov. 23, 1906, Jan. 18, 1907, Feb. 7, 1908; *Morrill Mail*, Aug. 27, 1908, May 13, 1909. See also, "Colored Man Found Dead Friday Morning," *Torrington Telegram*, July 24, 1919; Rose interview; U.S. Census, Patrick Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910, house #4. Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, Vol. 3, 137, includes figures on length of residency. U. S. General Land Office, survey plat of T26N R60W, 1880, microfilm, BLM archives, Cheyenne; *Mitchell Index*, Nov. 16 and 23, 1906, Jan. 18, 1907, June 26, 1908; Sioux County (Nebr.) Clerk's Office, book M, 443; Todd Guenther, "Could These Bones Be From A Negro?" *The Overland Journal* 19 (Summer 2001): 42–55.

²⁸ J. W. Smurr, "Jim Crow Out West," in J. W. Smurr, ed., *Historical Essays on Montana and the Northwest* (Helena: The Western Press, 1957), 163; "The Last Days of Jim Edwards," *Ebony Magazine* (March 1949):39.

²⁹ *Ansley Argosy*, Jan. 7 and 21, 1909. According to the U.S. Census Bureau as referenced in Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 152, there were only two black farms in Wyoming in 1900 and only nineteen in 1910. This author believes those

figures to be low. The experiences of other pioneering black ranchers in the area can be found in Todd Guenther, "At Home On The Range: Black Homesteaders in Wyoming, 1850–1950" (master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1988). Also included is a discussion of an unusual black homestead community near Sheridan, which was largely comprised of retired soldiers and their families; this group was not as dependent upon agriculture for their income as was the "real" farming community of Empire and is not, therefore, used for comparative purposes in this narrative. See also Todd Guenther, "Y'all Call Me Nigger Jim Now, But Someday You'll Call Me Mr. James Edwards," *Annals of Wyoming* 61 (1989): 22, 20–40; Catherine Nuttall (Edwards's neighbor of many decades) letter to author, Nov. 16, 1987; Todd Guenther, "Lucretia Marchbanks: A Black Woman in the Black Hills" *South Dakota History* 30 (Spring 2001): 1–25; Jack Ravage, *Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experience on the North American Frontier* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997); and Guenther, "Could These Bones Be From A Negro?" Relevant information can also be found in Frank N. Schubert, "The Black Army Regiments, 1885–1912" (master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1970), 96; Skylar S. Scott, "Black Women in Wyoming 1880–1910: A Forgotten Page of Wyoming History" (unpublished University of Wyoming history class paper, 1980, xerographic copy in author's possession), 7.

³⁰ The assertion that blacks were suspected of thefts and accused of other charges is from Rose interview and Larry Armstrong, director, Torrington (Wyo.) Homesteader Museum, telephone interview by author, Jan. 26, 1989. Verification is found in, "J. S. Speese vs. Yorick Nichols, Grand Larceny, Jan. 25, 1910," "Yorick Nichols vs. Speese Brothers, Repleven of Horse, Jan. 26, 1910," "Criminal Complaint of Yorick Nichols, Olin Overton, Leslie Burnett vs. Charles Speese and Joseph Speese, Feb. 12, 1910" "Criminal Complaint State of Wyoming vs. Charles Speese," all cases found in dockets of James Jackson, justice of the peace, xerographic copy on file, Torrington Homesteader Museum; and "Criminal Complaint, State of Wyoming vs. Nathan Taylor, April 20, 1912," "Swine Repleven, Squier Jones vs. John Speese, April 21, 1913," "Squier Jones vs. J. W. Speese for debt, Dec. 8, 1913," "Squier Jones vs. R. L. Speese for debt, Dec. 30, 1913," all found in dockets of C. P. Johnson, justice of the peace, xerographic copy on file, Torrington Homesteader Museum. See also *Morrill Mail*, Aug. 27, 1908, May 13, July 1, Nov. 4, and Dec. 9, 1909, Sept. 16, Nov. 11, and Dec. 30, 1910, Oct. 20, and 27, 1911; *Torrington Telegram*, Feb. 3, 10, and 17, 1910, Mar. 6, 1913.

³¹ *Torrington Telegram*, Sept. 22, 1910.

³² *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1909, Jan. 20, 1910. Birthdates, dates of marriages, numbers of children born, and numbers living are culled primarily from Ava Speese Day Mss.; Ava Speese Day family history notes, one and one half page typed document, n.d. about 1975, on file, Custer County Historical Society Museum, Broken Bow, Nebraska. See also U.S. Census, Seward County, Nebraska, 1880; Custer and Blaine counties, Nebraska, 1900, 1910, 1920; Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910; Goshen County, Wyoming, 1920, 1930; Douglas County, Nebraska, 1920, 1930; Scottsbluff County, Nebraska, 1920, 1930; Box Butte County, Nebraska, 1920, 1930; and Lancaster County, Nebraska, 1920, 1930.

³³ Information on nineteenth and early twentieth century reproduction, infant and childhood mortality can be found in many sources including Caplow, Hicks, and Wattenberg, *The First Measured Century*, 134, 135; John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Elliot West, *Growing Up With The Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989); Lillian Schlissel, Vicki L. Ruiz, and Janice Mack, *Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988).

³⁴ Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, 1911, vol. 3, 137;



Margaret Speese interview. More information about each family's homestead claim details including acreage, location, date claimed, whether it was relinquished or patented, and improvements are available in U. S. General Land Office tract books, BLM archives. *Brewster News*, Sept. 11, 1911; Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, 1911, vol.3, 157.

³⁵ Caplow, et.al., *The First Measured Century*, 96, 97.

³⁶ Rose interview. The original house was torn down in 1956. The only Taylor-era structure remaining on the ranch today is the poured concrete ice-house. All the other original outbuildings and corrals have been replaced.

³⁷ Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, 1911, vol. 3, 157; U.S. Census, Torrington Precinct, Laramie County, Wyoming, 1910, house #219; Combined Assessment Roll and Tax List, 1912, Vol. 3, 117, 134; U.S. Census, Empire, Wyoming, 1910; Halsey, Blaine County, Nebraska, 1910; and Thomas County, Nebraska, 1920. Baseman Taylor's probates in 1913 show his financial condition unchanged, with his estate valued at a little more than \$200 after his debts were paid. Goshen County (Wyo.) District Court, Probate 1-10 and 1-11, Baseman Taylor estate, on file, Wyoming State Archives, Cheyenne.

At first glance, many of the homesteaders along Spoon Hill Creek seemed to be better off financially in 1912, but that might result from inflated land values. Their standard of living had not changed appreciably. The John Speeses were now worth \$1,755. Joseph Speese had property valued at \$1,370, his wife Lizzie had a claim of her own valued at \$350, for a family total of \$1,720. Radford still lagged with only \$675. Charles' total property value was \$1,755. The widowed, nearly seventy-year-old Susan Speese had her own small homestead claim, valued at \$95. In one year, the extended Speese families' total worth had increased by over 30 percent, to \$5,905. Meanwhile, the nearly destitute Taylors were, incredibly during this booming era, falling farther behind. Otis had property worth \$425, a decrease of \$155. Baseman's real and personal property had climbed only \$30, to \$320.

³⁸ Guenther, "Lucretia Marchbanks."

³⁹ R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News." Their children were Russel, Jr., Elbert, Tom, Bill, Steve, and Paul. They had two daughters, Theodosia, named for the children's maternal Grandmother Scroggins, who also lived in the Spoon Hill area, and Mary. According to Larry Armstrong, telephone call to author, Sept. 9, 1994, Russel Taylor's mother in law, Theodosia Scroggins, had her own homestead. Information about the Taylor family is from Paul Taylor, Sr. (Russel's youngest son), and Tom Taylor's daughter, Jeanetta Owens, personal interview, Sept. 9, 1994, and telephone interview, Oct. 31, 1994, both by Larry Armstrong; Jeanetta Owens, telephone interview by author, Dec. 7, 2000. The information about Russel's previous assignment in Tennessee is from Ken Rost, reference librarian, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Office of Church History, Philadelphia, telephone interview by author, Dec. 19, 2000; R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News;" and *The Monitor*, Sept. 15, 1921, Sept. 17, 1926; U. S. Census, Omaha, Nebraska, 1930.

The Presbyterian Church's Bellevue College, which operated from 1880 to 1919, was very small, graduating only about 250 students in forty years. Of these, some forty or fifty became ministers. There has been speculation that Russel Taylor attended graduate school in the south while in Tennessee, but descendants believe he obtained his entire education in Bellevue. In his letter, "A Bit of Racial News," he states that he was "northern" trained and educated; it is most likely that he studied in Bellevue, but he may have attended the Iowa divinity school where Henry Speese graduated, or another institution altogether. Regardless of where he took his graduate studies, Russel probably obtained his divinity degree shortly after his 1896 graduation from Bellevue. About 1910 the college divested the ministerial training program and divinity school to an Omaha campus which became associated by proximity with

Omaha University. The current Bellevue College, which opened in the 1960s, is not a successor to the original college.

⁴⁰ R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News."

⁴¹ Empire's "colored" teacher, eighteen-year-old Sallie Katherine Thistle, also called Tyler, was enumerated in Cheyenne with her twenty-five-year-old brother, William Thistle, a professional piano player, and eighty-year-old mother, Josephine Tyler. Three of Josephine's eight children were living in 1910. She had been born in Tennessee, as were her parents. William was born either in Indiana or Indian Territory (Oklahoma), and Sallie was born in Wyoming, according to the U.S. Census, Cheyenne, 1910, 3-WD; *Torrington Telegram*, Apr. 28, 1910; R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News."

⁴² Rose interview.

⁴³ Re: Sheep Creek school 1909-11, see *Torrington Telegram*, "North Sheep Creek Items," Sept. 9, 16, and 22, 1910, Nov. 1916 (?), clipping on file, Torrington Homesteader Museum; "Goshen County Teachers' Institute 4th Session". "At the Teachers Institut [sic]," and "The Teachers' Reception," *Torrington Telegram*, Nov. 1916 (?); R. Taylor, "A Bit of Racial News." Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 226, states that no segregated school for blacks was ever started; Rose interview; Ava Speese Day in Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, 265; Armstrong, telephone interview, Jan. 26, 1989.

⁴⁴ Presbyterian Board of Publications and Sabbath-School Work, Sabbath School and Missionary Department, *Wyoming: A Synod in the Making*, (n.d.), 4, found in "Churches-Presbyterian" folder, vertical files, Wyoming State Archives.

⁴⁵ *Sioux County History: The First 100 Years, 1886-1986* (Harrison, Nebr.: Harrison Community Club, n.d.), 107; *Mitchell Index*, Jan. 18, 1907.

⁴⁶ Rita L. Moroney, research administrator/historian, Office of the Postmaster General, letter to author, Dec. 23, 1988; "The Post Offices of Wyoming, July 25, 1868-December 31, 1975," no author, no date, compiled from Daniel Y. Meschter, "Record of Appointments of Postmasters," National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 28, 1868-1931, analysis of Ruth Dolzeal, "US Postal Guides" on file, Pioneer Museum, Lander, Wyoming; and Albert S. Burlinson, Postmaster General, *Postal Laws and Regulations* (Washington, D.C., GPO, 1913); Cecil and Elsie Rose, "Empire Post Office on Cunningham Ranch," *Sioux County History*, 108. Two articles in the Oct. 3, 1912, *Torrington Telegram* mention the new post office opening in 1912 at the old "Wilmert Ranch," presumably the name of the original builders of Otis' house.

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Elsie and Cecil Rhodes by author, Oct. 29, 1988. The depression that marked the location of Russel Taylor's dugout was destroyed by construction of a railroad through the valley during the early 1980s; *The Monitor*, July 29, 1916.

⁴⁸ Rose telephone interview by author, Dec. 29, 1988; *Torrington Telegram*, Oct. 24, 1910, Aug. 8, 1912; Boyd Reese, reference librarian, Presbyterian Church (USA), letter to author, Nov. 23, 1988; Presbyterian Church General Assembly Minutes, statistics on Grace Presbyterian Church, Empire Wyoming, 1912, 1916, and 1920.

⁴⁹ *Sioux County History*, 113, 117; "Blacks and Whites Homesteaded Sheep Creek," *Mitchell Index*, Jan. 7, 1987.

⁵⁰ *Torrington Telegram*, Aug. 16 and 22, 1912; Carl Hallberg, Wyoming State Archives, "A Critique of Protestant History in Wyoming," manuscript dated Apr. 27, 2002, in possession of author; "How the West Was Really Won," multiple articles in *Christian History*, 19, (no.2).

⁵¹ *Morrill Mail*, Aug. 6, 1915, Nov. 17, 1916, Dec. 7, 1917, June 28, 1918, and May 1, 1924; Helen Spencer, "Sheep Creek Baptist Church," and "Sheep Creek Presbyterian Church & Cemetery,"



in *Sioux County History*, 116, 117, provides slightly conflicting accounts of the churches; Haycraft letter to *Morrill Mail*, Dec. 30, 1920; "History of the Presbyterian Church in Nebraska" (1924) says the Sheep Creek Presbyterian Church was administered as part of the Morrill Presbyterian Church. Currens seemed to follow the Speese and Taylor families from place to place. He started organizing churches about 1885, was working in the Westerville / Custer County area in the mid-1890s, then homesteaded north of Morrill and held tent revival meetings while starting his competing Sheep Creek congregation. A May 2, 1924, article in *The Monitor* reveals that Currens presented a lecture on tithing at St. Pauls Presbyterian, where Russel Taylor was the minister.

⁵² *Sioux County History*, 117; Boyd Reese letter to author; Presbyterian Church General Assembly Minutes, statistics on Grace Presbyterian Church, Empire, Wyoming, 1912, 1916, 1920.

⁵³ Ava Speese Day in Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, 273; Rose interview; Mrs. George Borton, "Red Cloud Union Presbyterian Church," from Goshen County Rural Cemetery Record, n.d., n.p., which appears to be a page from published history of county churches, Torrington Homesteader Museum.

⁵⁴ Re: Sarah Speese Taylor / Leota Taylor grave. The grave at the Sheep Creek Presbyterian site is identified by local sources (e.g., Rose interview) as being that of Otis Taylor's wife and the Speese brothers' sister. The stone appears to postdate the burial and may have been placed by neighbors at a much later date. Sarah delivered a baby girl named Leota about 1915. Given the trauma of the mother's death shortly after the birth of the baby, who many neighbors never got to know well since the community began to disintegrate about this time, it is possible that some well-meaning individuals confused the names of mother and daughter later when they commissioned the gravestone. The 1920 U.S. Census for Empire seems to confirm that Sarah had passed away. Though the writing is hard to read, it appears that Otis was enumerated as a widower and baby Leota was five years old.

⁵⁵ The bitter family returned Baseman Taylor's body to Westerville, Nebraska, for burial beside his wife, who died there in 1907. "To the Insane Asylum," and "Death of Baseman Taylor," *Torrington Telegram*, Nov. 6, 1913; Goshen County District Court, Baseman Taylor probates 1-10 and 1-11, and Civil Case 25, "The State of Wyoming for the use and benefit of Russel Taylor, Administrator of the Estate of Baseman Taylor, Deceased vs. Michael A. Hayes and the United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company, Defendants," Wyoming State Archives.

⁵⁶ Rose interview by author, Dec. 29, 1988; *Torrington Telegram* (1915) clipping and unidentified Torrington (?) newspaper clippings (n.d., about 1913 and 1915) in files of Torrington Homesteader Museum; Armstrong interview, Jan. 26, 1989.

⁵⁷ Rose interview; *Morrill Mail*, "Henry column," Sept. 23, 1910; Armstrong, telephone call, Sept. 9, 1994; Robert A. Goldberg, "Beneath the Hood and Robe: A Socioeconomic Analysis of Ku Klux Klan Membership in Denver, Colorado, 1921-1925," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11(1980): 181-98; Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 289-91.

⁵⁸ "Criminal Complaint, State of Wyoming vs. O. R. Taylor, August 10, 1914," "State of Wyoming vs. Radford L. Speese, August 14, 1914," both found in C.P. Johnson justice of the peace docket, xerographic copy on file, Torrington Homesteader Museum.

⁵⁹ U.S. General Land Office, plat book records, E1/2 of NE Section 4 T25N R60W; *Torrington Telegram*, Feb. 3 and Mar. 24, 1910, Feb. 16, 1911, Aug. 29, 1912, and undated ca. 1915 clippings on file, Torrington Homesteader Museum; *Sioux County History*, 100.

⁶⁰ Ava Speese Day in, Albert, *Sod House Memories*, 262.

⁶¹ Reece, *History of Cherry County, Nebraska*, 93-94; Don Hanna, Jr., "Brownlee" and "DeWitty Community, the Negro Settlement," and Ava Speese Day, "St. James RMC Church and Cemetery" in Beel, ed., *A Sandhill Century*, 243-47, map, 250. Alberts, in *Sod House Memories*, 261, mistakenly identifies Jerry Shores as being Charles Speese's brother rather than his uncle. Ava Speese Day, in *ibid*, 262, 265, identifies Esthyr Shores as "Aunt Ida's sister." Ida Shores married Rosetta Meehan Speese's brother, Dennis, in Westerville during a double wedding ceremony with Charles and Rosetta in 1907. Ida and Esthyr were daughters of J. W. and Millie Ann Shores.

The longest entry in Alberts, *Sod House Memories*, is Ava Speese Day's description of family and community life in Audacious, one of the Cherry County communities, 261-75. This entry is prefaced by Alberts's unusually long introduction titled, "Negro Homesteading In Nebraska," 256-61. Both Alberts and the Sod House Society are to be commended for including this material. It is interesting, just the same, that this unusually descriptive and valuable section is relegated to the back of the book, calling to mind the status of black bus passengers in the Jim Crow South.

⁶² Wyoming's twentieth century lynching legacy is examined in Todd Guenther, "'Another Good Negro': African American Lynchings in the Equality State," ms in press, *Annals of Wyoming*. Sources for this paragraph include *The Sweet Smell of Sagebrush: A Prisoner's Diary, 1903-1912* (Rawlins, Wyo.: Friends of the Old Pen, 1990), 145-49; Michael J. Pfeifer, Evergreen State College, "Race and Lynching in the American West in the Early Twentieth Century," paper presented at the British Association of American Studies, Staffordshire, U.K., Apr. 2001; *Rock Springs (Wyo.) Rocket*, Dec. 14, 1917; *Cheyenne Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1917; Dec. 10, 11, and 19, 1918; *Green River (Wyo.) Star*, Dec. 10 and 18, 1918; *Salt Lake Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1918; Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 289-91.

⁶³ "Residents Issue Real Ultimatum: People Living South of Tracks Want No More Negroes in Midst" (Oct. 7, 1919), "The Colored Population" (Oct. 7, 1919), "None of Council's Affair: Colored Problem Not Under Their Jurisdiction" (Oct. 17, 1919), *Scottsbluff (Nebr.) Star-Herald*; "Object to Negroes on Overland Drive" (Oct. 7, 1919), "Council Meets in Regular Session" (Oct. 10, 1919), *Scottsbluff (Nebr.) Republican*; "A Passing Incident—A Possibility," Russel Taylor to the editor, *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, Nov. 18, 1919; *The Monitor*, Sept. 15, 1921.

⁶⁴ Larson, *History of Wyoming*, 415, 418, 445; Marybeth Norton, et al, *A People and a Nation: A History of the United States Since 1865*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982), 671, 709; Peter W. Huntoon, "The National Bank Failures in Wyoming, 1924," *Annals of Wyoming*, 54 (1982): 35, 36.

⁶⁵ Ava Speese Day, Mar. 28, 1964, letter to NSHS.

⁶⁶ Margaret Speese interview; "Four to be cited at Lambda Kappa Mu luncheon," *Staten Island (N.Y.) Sunday Advance*, Apr. 10, 1977.

