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*Oscar Micheaux*

## Dakota Images

One of thirteen children, pioneer black novelist and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux was born to former slaves on a farm near the Ohio River on 2 January 1884. Micheaux disliked farm life but enjoyed developing his salesmanship skills as a vegetable vendor. A freethinker, Micheaux left home at seventeen and eventually became a Pullman porter in Chicago where he learned of the West and homesteading. In 1904, Micheaux was the only black to purchase a relinquishment claim in Gregory County on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. A hard worker and successful farmer, he estimated his worth at twenty thousand dollars by age twenty-four.

Much of Micheaux's early life is obscure and sketchy, but some of the story is revealed in his autobiographical novels *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913), *The Forged Note: A Romance of the Darker Races* (1915), and *The Homesteader* (1917). While homesteading, Micheaux fell in love with a white woman but married a black minister's daughter from Chicago who later left him. He began his career as an author in 1908 and in 1913 published *The Conquest* and traveled around the country, particularly in the South, promoting the book and his ideas.

In 1918, he organized the Oscar Micheaux Corporation in New York with funds obtained from Oklahoma farmers. The following year, his third book, *The Homesteader*, based on his South Dakota experiences, became the first all-black full-length American film directed by a black. In the next thirty years, Micheaux did the creative and administrative work, wrote, directed, edited, and promoted more than thirty-five films. Because of his promotional skills, the Micheaux Film Corporation of Harlem was the longest lived and most productive black film company.

In 1924, Micheaux produced *Birthright*, an important film on southern race relations. Two years later, he married actress Alice B. Russell. His first talking picture, *The Exile*, was produced in 1931, and in 1948 Micheaux made his last movie, *The Betrayal*, about a black South Dakota homesteader in love with a white woman.

Oscar Micheaux died on 25 March 1951 in Charlotte, North Carolina, during a promotional tour. He was posthumously awarded the Director's Guild of America's Golden Jubilee Special Directorial Award, inducted into the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame (which annually honors blacks in films in Micheaux's memory), and has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

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