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Free State of Jones Review

United States history is taught in every public school across the country yet there are so many things left out of the standard courses these schools provide. Gary Ross’ *Free State of Jones* takes a very unknown but yet important piece of history and brings it to life showing the struggles of the black man and the poor white man during and after the American Civil War. Ross’ portrayal of these struggles such as the initial climb out of the swamps and into the power of freedom and the hardships during the Reconstruction of the South, is detailed and accurate. We see the United States, after the end of the Civil War, amend the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, ending slavery. We also see the addition of the 15th amendment, which granted all freedmen the right to vote in the United States. Through all of these positive gains, Ross tells the story of the hardships endured during the Reconstruction of the South such as the rise of the KKK and their racist crusade against freedmen and the sly attempts of the Southern States to control freedmen through shady local laws. *Free State of Jones* shows us these hardships and fights in a truthful and dramatic manner that brings meaning to the war fought by these men and women.

We first see the poor farmer hero, Newt Knight, fighting for the Confederacy, during the Civil War. He is a good soldier but does not believe in the cause as he knows that many rich folk use slaves and exploit people like him to become richer. This causes Newt to abandon the Confederacy where he meets escaped slaves and other white deserters. Newt unites these people in one common goal and that is to defend their freedoms. There is no alliance to either side at this point, just themselves and their families. Newt successfully rallies enough support from his fellow men of Mississippi to take back the county of Jones from the Confederacy in a stunning act of bravery and claims the county as its own Free State of Jones. The Confederacy obviously does not like this and sends troops his way to retake the County of Jones. Newt seeks out help from a Union General but is sent little aid as his Company is small. The men then take the fight back to the swamp and move into Soso where they begin to rebuild.

At the end of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln and Congress pass the 14th amendment to the United States Constitution, freeing all slaves. At this point, Newt had won the fight, but he has unknowingly not yet won the war.

After the Civil War, we see many changes made in the community, especially for the freed colored folk. Black men and women and children are taught to read and write, a trait that was strictly prohibited under slavery. People of all ages are brought into classrooms where they practice reading and writing words. This would be some of the first school sessions for colored people. Newt and the freedmen form the Union League where they meet to continue to rally support for human civil rights. Here, they read to the freedmen the 15th Amendment to the Constitution which grants all men, regardless of race or color, the right to vote in all elections. This was a huge step for Civil Rights and a massive milestone for the Reconstruction of the South. At the end of the film, we learn that, even though Newt and Rachel, his love interest who is his grandfather’s former slave, cannot get married, he gifts to her 160 acres of land. This makes Rachel one of the only black women to be a property owner, another huge step for the civil rights movement of the late 1800s.   
 Reconstruction wasn’t a time of peace and love however as the Union’s victory over the Confederacy in the Civil War was only the beginning of a new war that took place all throughout the Reconstruction era. *Free State of Jones* gruesomely depicts the racial struggles of the freedmen by the resistance to the changes made by the Union put up by the Southern States. States like Mississippi created shady laws to cover up slaver like “apprenticeships” that legally allowed for the involuntary enslavement of colored people through different means. Newt encounters this when his mate Moses’ son is abducted by one of these Apprentice Masters and sets off to rescue him from the State of Mississippi. He wins this fight by buying the child back from the Apprentice Master. The Union then responds to these kinds of local laws by placing the South under Martial Law to enforce the rules provided by the Constitution. The Southern States were not the only group of people interested in suppressing the freedmen however. Ross’ shows the birth of the infamous hate group, the Ku Klux Klan, storm into the fields of freedmen and their supporters and burn down their houses and churches. We see Klan support grow as Klansmen tear freedmen from their homes and beat, shoot, and hang them as signs of white supremacy and acts of hate. Moses is killed by three Klansmen who ambush him on a walk home. They are most likely angered by his encouragement and enablement of the voting of the freedmen. This right was given to them but is not respected well in the South. Newt brings the freedmen to vote on election day in 1875 and asks for Republican tickets. He is told that they do not have any so Newt presses them. Him and the freedmen vote Republican once finally given the voting tickets, but the results are skewed, and their votes aren’t counted. Ross also shows us blatantly racist segregation laws that prevent Newt and Rachel from getting married. This is also the premise of the subplot where, in the future 20th centaury, Newt’s son with Rachel cannot marry his love interest because of his black heritage and the still active segregation laws. The add in of this subplot are to show that, even after the reconstruction era, colored people suffered much resistance and hatred towards them.

Ross paints us a picture of the marvelous strides made in civil rights by showing us the milestones made during the Reconstruction era. He shows us the 14th and 15th Amendments and the valiant efforts made by the Union to, not only preserve the Union, but to protect those people within it. But he does not leave out the horrible ugly events that lie within the Reconstruction era that are filled with hatred and racism. *Free State of* Jones depicts the Reconstruction era in its raw form and shows us the truths, both good and evil and allows us to connect and understand the terrible struggles of the freedmen during this time. These truths are necessary to understand the history presented to us in its fullest and to appreciate the struggles that these men endured to make a world, like the one we live in today, possible.

Works Cited

Ross, Gary, director. *Free State of Jones*. Larger Than Life Productions, 2016.