

BLACKS AND SETTLEMENT

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

1492. That was the year it all started. Pedro Alonzo Nino, a Black man was on Columbus' first voyage to the New World. Some came as soldiers but most came as slaves. The latter often ran away and lived among the Indians. Governor Ouvando, the governor of Hispaniola, wrote often to the king and registered complaints concerning runaway slaves. By 1527, Antonio de Herrera, the Royal Historian, reported that there were in excess of 10,000 Africans in Nuevo Espana and by the year 1600, that number had grown to 90,000. All of that occurred before the English arrived at North America.

The most famous of Black explorers, who was present during the period of Spanish ex-

ploration, was Stephen Dorantes or Esteban. He was a slave and had been born in Azamore, Morocco. He arrived to the New World in 1527 as the servant of Andres Dorantes. He became a part of a 500 man expedition which explored the northern part of the Gulf of Mexico. The commander of the expedition was Panfilo de Narvaez. The expedition was doomed from the start — starvation, pestilence, cannibalism, desertions, disease and mismanagement were all culprits. The original 500 shrunk to four. Esteban, Dorantes, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca and one other. They wandered in the desert, from tribe to tribe, for over eight years. Esteban served as a guide with the de Niza expedition of 1539.

Esteban was the first non-Indian to explore Arizona and New Mexico. He would not be the last. The role he played was quite important in that he was quite often viewed by Indian groups, which the expedition encountered, as something of a special person. Obviously it had something to do with the color of his skin.

Halfway across the country and far to the north, another Black man was making his mark on American History. Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, the son of a French mariner and an African slave woman in Haiti, had been educated in Paris, France. He returned to the states, worked as a sailor and later became a fur trapper. In 1779, he established a trading post at Eschikagou. That post was the site of present day Chicago. He

lived in and around that area until his death in 1818.

Throughout the country, there were Black people involved in exploratory and settlement activities. There was Negro Abraham who served as an interpreter for Seminole Indians in their negotiations with Washington, D.C. in 1825. Ben Bruno, another runaway slave, fought with seminoles when Spanish Florida was illegally invaded by American forces under the command of Andrew Jackson in 1816. There were more Blacks involved in those conflicts than there were Indians.

While these events were taking place elsewhere, the area of the Great Basin remained untouched. A small number of explorers had skirted it but none dared enter the "great desert". Peter Skein Ogden, represen-



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ting the English Hudson Bay Company, was probably the first non-Indian to enter Nevada. His expedition, like others, was in the area in search of the valuable furs which had become a part of the growing fur trade.

There were French, English, American, Spanish and Black explorers and fur trappers. I make the distinction between the last group and the others because they were to be found among all of the other groups. Most of these men lived and hunted alone while others worked within companies or groups of men. Basically, the life of the average mountain man was filled with excitement, adventure, thrills and spills. The mountains of the Rockies, Wasatch, Sierra and others not only had an abundance of beaver but also predatory animals. Grizzlies, cougars, wild boar

and other such animals abounded. Behind every tree, bush, outcropping of rock or any other place could lurk a hidden danger. Each day could end as violently for the hunters as for the hunted.

At camp, when alone, a trapper might chew on some jerky, fresh meat or fish depending on his situation. Those who knew how to write, usually would pull a charred stick from the fire and record the day's events. The basis for their diaries was real enough but, quite often, they tended to embellish their exploits as do fishermen and hunters of our own times.

The ten inch striper became fifteen inches, twelve foot grizzlies became twenty feet tall, two rattlers became a whole nest and a cougar cub became a ferocious mountain lion. Even the geography grew. What had been a five mile trek over reasonably rough

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