

BLACKS AND SETTLEMENT OF THE WEST

By *Roosevelt Fitzgerald*

1492. That was the year it all started. Pedro Alonso 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 Ovando, the governor of Hispaniola, wrote often to the king and registered complaints concerning runaways. 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 exploration, 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 Eschikageou. 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 Skain Ogden, representing 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,

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

mountain lion. Even the geography grew. What had been a five mile trek over reasonably rough terrain became a fifty mile jaunt over a snow capped mountain and a three foot deep stream became a raging torrent.

Later, as the mountain men began to participate in their yearly "rendezvous", they would exchange tales. Each would vie with the others in telling "tall tales". They were not lies but only a cultural trait of men who, for entertainment and to alleviate their own tensions, felt compelled to participate in those kinds of verbal games. In a different vein, those verbal competitions were quite similar to the numerous other kinds of folklore which develop within isolated segments of society.

Moses "Black" Harris was the first Black trapper to enter the Great Basin but he would not be the last. He did not enter Nevada but he came close — the area around the great salt lake. The early fur traders "always got a Negro if possible to negotiate for them with the Indians because of their pacifying effect. They could manage them better than the white men, with less friction." Harris performed such tasks.

In 1826, a small band of Americans representing the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, left Salt Lake headed west toward California. They

were led by Jedediah Strong Smith. All total, there were fifteen men in the party. Two of these men were Black. The expedition entered Nevada near the present town of Bunkerville on the Virgin River, turned southward and followed the Colorado River southward and then westward to the San Gabriel Mission which later became Los Angeles or the City of angels.

Only the fringes of Nevada had been touched. What the interior had to offer was yet to be discovered. John C. Fremont was the first to explore any major portion of Nevada. He became the most well known of the early Nevada explorers. After exploring a large portion of the northwest territory, he turned southward in search of a river which had been named Humboldt by Peter Ogden. With his small party of adventurers were at least four Black men.

Through the efforts of all of these men, the void which had been called the Great Basin (Nevada) began to be identified. Mountains, valleys, rivers and washes were discovered and named. Some were named for Indian groups, some for the explorers themselves and other points of interest were named for loved-ones or for particular characteristics they possessed. Ogden, Ruby Valley, Wasatch, Emerald Mountain and such as that are exam-

ples.

Those mountain men blazed the trails which others would later follow. They wanted to keep at least two steps ahead of civilization. They wanted no part, for varying reasons, of the trappings of civilization — houses, soft beds and laws. They either were or became tough and hardy and they tolerated no abuse. You would rather fight a forest fire than to fight one of them.

The mountain men of the early west were an independent lot. They were not to be "fooled" with. They asked no questions of the background of those they came upon and when some tenderfoot would ask where they had come from they would sardonically and sarcastically reply: "I haven't been there yet".

There was a unique quality of friendship which existed among most of those men. One was not concerned with what color a person's skin happened to be but only with whether or not they could handle themselves in a scrape. This is an aspect of the "good old days" which we could use more of today.

Register To Vote

Community Ed Conference Scheduled For Oct. 27-29

BALLOT QUESTION INFO AVAILABLE AT LIBRARIES

The Annual Community Education Conference will be held Oct. 27, 28 and 29 at the Hacienda Hotel. The keynote speaker will be Dr. Jack Minzey of East Michigan University on innovations in the field of community education, followed by a panel presentation and then a question and answer period. Specialized workshops will be offered in successful programs from Salt Lake, Tucson, Salem, and Little Rock. A stimulation experience will be provided in which each participant will have the opportunity to experience the communication and collaboration required in the process of setting up different types of community education programs (urban and rural).

senior citizen leaders, and many other members of the community who want to develop improved networks in community education should register.

FEE: \$35 includes morning coffee, two luncheons. Late registration is \$45.

ROOM RESERVATIONS: Registered conference attendees will receive a special rate of \$26 per day. Out-of-state toll-free reservations may be made by calling 800-634-6713.

REGISTRATION: Mail your registration and fee to: Clark County Community College, Division of Community Education, Rm. 1228, 3200 E. Cheyenne Ave., No. Las Vegas, NV 89030.

The Conference is being sponsored by the Clark County Community College, Nevada Department of Education, and the Nevada Association of Community Education. For additional information, call 702/643-6060, ext. 280 or 415.

Educators, parks and recreation leaders, city and county managers and council members, governmental planners, cooperative extension leaders, PTA members, non-profit agency leaders, fire and police community safety officers,

To further its goal of providing access to information, the Clark County Library District plans to set up a ballot question center at all branch libraries to provide the public with facts, both pro and con, about the ballot questions to be voted upon at the general election in November.

According to Beverly Carlino, community relations coordinator, interested groups may bring their materials to the community relations office at the Flamingo Library, 1401 E. Flamingo Road, for system-wide distribution.

Carlino said, "As the dialogue increases and pro and con arguments develop, Clark County libraries plan to be the special information centers on these issues so that the voters can discover for themselves just what the questions are all about."

For further information about the ballot question centers, call the Flamingo Library at 733-7810.



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Professor Fitzgerald is director of ethnic studies at University of Nevada-Las Vegas


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 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 grizzleys became twenty feet tall, two rattlers became a whole nest and a cougar cub became a ferocious

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John Pitts

John brings to the real estate industry a background of mathematics, having been a mathematics teacher for over 20 years. At present John is a teacher with Clark County School District. He doubles as a residential sales person with Toler Realty. John, his wife and daughter arrived in Las Vegas from Gary, Indiana.

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