

# 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 of-

ten 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, An-

tonio 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 Azamora, 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 seminole 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.

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.

ting 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 examples.

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.



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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, 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, 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

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 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 represen-

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