# BLACKS AND SETTLEMENT OF THE WEST-

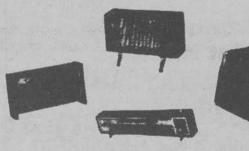
By Roosevell Fitzgerald

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 of-

ten ran away and lived among the Indians. Governor Ouvando, the governor of Hispaniola, wrote often to the king and registered complaints concerning runaways. By 1527, Anarrived at



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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 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 apart 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. Esteb an 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

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

educated in Paris, Fran-

ce. 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

Throughout the coun-

try, there were Black

people involved in ex-

ploratory and settlement

activities. There was

Negro Abraham who ser-

ved as an interpreter for

Seminole Indians in their

negotiations with

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Haiti, had been

1825. Ben Bruno, knew how to write, 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.

Washington, D.C. in situation. Those who usually would pull a charred stick from the fire and re cord the day's events. The basis for their diaries was real they tended to embellish their exploits as do fishermen and hunters of our own times.



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

The ten inch striper

became fifteen inches.

became twenty feet tall

whole nest and a cougar

cub became a ferocious

mountain lion. Even the

geography grew. What

had been a five mile trek

terrain became a fifty

mile jaunt over a snow

capped mountain and a

three foot deep stream

twelve foot grizzleys

were taking place elsewhere, the area of 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 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. 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. Griz-

At camp, when alone, a trapper might chew on

formed such tasks. or fish depending on his of Americans represen-

Nevada had been touched. What the interior had to offer was vet 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

ting the Rocky Mountain

Fur Company, left Salt

Lake headed west

toward California. They

were led by Jebediah

Strong Smith. All total,

there were fifteen men in

the party. Two of these

men were Black. The ex-

pedition entered Nevada

near the present town of

Bunkerville on the Virgin

River, turned southward

and followed the

Colorado River south-

ward and then westward

to the San Gabriel

Mission which later

became Los Angeles or

Only the fringes of

the City of angels.

exploring a large portion 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 examblazed 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

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 sardonically and sarcastically reply: "I haven't been there

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

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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 nunters as for the hun-

some jerky, fresh meat

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 en-

tertainment 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

segements 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 came close - the area around the great salt 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 per-

In 1826, a small band