

BLACKS IN EARLY NEVADA

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

While there were few individual fortunes made out of the mining experience, those who did make it big made it real big. The small time operators, prospectors and others eked out a good living. Some even became rich but they did not become wealthy. The wealthy person has more than he'll ever need while the simply rich could possibly go broke wither through overspending, mismanagement or over-speculating or any number of other reasons.

Black men had little or no opportunity to share

in those golden opportunities. Sure, they could work in the mines but only for someone else and even then the most they could earn was \$4.00 per day and in most places it was even less than that. The jobs they were permitted to have generally had little to do, directly, with mining. They were barbers, bartenders, janitors, maids, honkey tonk piano players and common laborers. Believe it or not, there were doctors, educators, newspapermen and other professionals. Sadly,

they had little opportunity to practice their crafts.

As we can see, so far, not only had Black people been restricted in terms of where they could live but they were additionally restricted in terms of where they could work. First one thing and then another. When would it end?

Like World War II, which started with a mere trickle and gushed into a flood, the eroding of the rights of Black people, in Nevada, was similar. Such is the way that rights are lost—one at a time.

For the remainder of the nineteenth century, conditions for Blacks in Nevada continued to deteriorate. One hundred and twenty years ago, in 1861, Nevada drafted a territorial constitution. It placed numerous restrictions

on Black people. They could not vote, serve as juries or in the militia and they were excluded from the public schools.

Even though the passage of the Civil War and Reconstruction Amendments were worded in such ways as necessary to affect those restrictions, there was little done by local and state governing bodies to protect those rights for Black people. The number of Black people during the years between the close of the Civil War and the turn of the century fluctuated from a high of 396 in 1880 to a low of 134 in 1900.

It is clear that because of the smallness of their numbers and the almost total absence of white support, when matters pertaining to civil rights would arise, they would always unceremoniously

be democratically voted down. Such is the way of democracy. If you happen to be in a minority, then the majority will usually have its way even if what they do is not compatible to the aims of democracy.

A year ago, Las Vegas celebrated its Diamond Jubilee. It had only been seventy-five years since the city was officially founded. Initially, the city was wide open. Whoever had the desire to could live wherever they wished. Such democracy would only continue to exist for another four years. By 1909, the local land agent was beginning to establish a policy in which Black and other racial minorities would be restricted in where they could live. Those who were already here were permitted to remain where they were but any newcomers were

faceted with the very real prospect of being restricted to Block Seventeen — next door to the "red light" district.

Once again, their numbers were not great enough to demand democracy and no one in a position of authority saw fit to remember that that kind of behavior on the part of land agents did not mesh with the ideals of democracy. But, who cares about democracy when racism shows its ugly head? Apparently no one did. After all, the restrictions were only on "coloreds, Mexicans, Chinamen and other foreigners". It has always been ok to mistreat them.

How was the remainder of society to know that discrimination is habit forming? Once the habit takes hold it is difficult to discriminate in one's discriminatory behavior. Today, it is reaching out and touching more than just the "coloreds, Mexicans, Chinamen and other foreigners". It is beginning to touch average white Americans too.

My, my. It is not too well known but, the first Black person to enter Nevada was John Peter Ranne. He accompanied Jedediah Strong Smith in 1826. A year later, Smith once again came to Nevada and with him was Polette Labross, another Black man. There were numerous others who were explorers, mountaintmen and fur trappers. They helped bring a knowledge of Nevada to Americans and thereby expanding our awareness of the Great Basin. They had also been systematically excluded from the history books.

Thanks to Professor Elmer Rusco of the Political Science Department at UNR, such is no longer the case. His book, which is subtitled *Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century*, which was published in 1975, broke new ground in the study of the presence and contributions of Black people in the area which was commonly referred to as the Great Basin.

The number of Black people in Nevada did not amount to a thousand or more until the 1940s. In

spite of that, they were treated as though they posed a great threat to those of anglo extraction. In 1860 there were only forty four Black people in the entire state and ten years later that number had grown to only 324 in spite of the fact that Nevada was like a magnet in attracting prospectors to its gold and silver fields.

For the twenty-five years following Jed Smith's venture into Nevada in 1826, the total number of non-Indians to enter the area was seldom more than one-hundred at a time. Those were usually caravans travelling on the Old Spanish Trail which extended from Santa Fe to Southern California. The

number of Blacks to venture through the area was much less.

They were all intent on getting to the gold fields of California. They came



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Following the gold rush to California in 1849, the numbers of people crossing the area increased dramatically. Few of those travellers remained in Nevada.

in all colors and nationalities and they all were hopeful of finding the "mother lode".

Due to the Compromise of 1850, California entered the Union as

a free state. This meant, of course, that slavery would not be permitted in that state. It did not mean, however, that the bulk of those who had rushed off to the gold fields had any endearing love for Black people. Quite the contrary.

Throughout the area, whenever and wherever gold was found, white miners established, in effect, gold camp laws. In many instances there were no sheriffs or marshalls to protect them or their claims. They had to be their own law enforcers. They carried that responsibility a bit too far. They were vigilantes and quite often they resorted to lynching law. They even made

Blacks and Chinese from staking out their own mining claims. In some places that exclusion also applied to Mexicans who were not then, and in some places today, considered bona fide citizens of the country.

Keeping those who were racially different out of the gold competition was not the only

vigilante groups were also involved in preventing certain people from living in certain parts of town. They were restricted. There developed, as a result of those restrictions, Chinese enclaves and also what was referred to as "darky towns". At that point in our history, indians were merely being killed off.

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