

AMERICANS HISTORY BOOKS FORGOT

Negro Erected First Building in Chicago

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"Chicago, Chicago, that bustlin' town" was always pretty windy but it wasn't always so bustling.

In the mid-18th Century, when it was nothing but windswept plains, a Negro fur trader and trapper named Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable erected the first building in what was to become that Midwestern metropolis.

Mr. du Sable was an early specimen of that hardy breed of men — both black and white, tho the blacks are rarely mentioned in Western history — who found Eastern civilization too confining. They went West seeking more land, freedom and gold. Negroes especially looked for the freedom.

¶ Married Indians

Occasionally they found it. In the dust of trail drives, where every man had a hard job to do, little attention was paid to color — except the Indian's. Redskins were a common target for both blacks and whites, tho Negroes intermarried with Indians frequently.

At first, Negroes were in the west solely as slaves to wealthy ranchers. When a few families migrated "en masse" to settle the frontiers, as did white families.

A few black groups, such as the Exodusters of Nicodemus Colony in Kansas, tried to set up Utopian communities along Biblical lines. These failed, as most Utopias do, but the people stayed on. And more and more Negroes came: at least 5000 individuals after the Oregon Trail opened, still more — and two Negro cavalry regiments — after the Civil War. They moved out as goldhunters, cowhands, mule skinnors, hos-

tlers, hotelkeepers, cooks, trail drivers. A typical trail drive heading for Dodge City contained at least two or three Negroes out of an eight-man crew.

¶ Cowboys

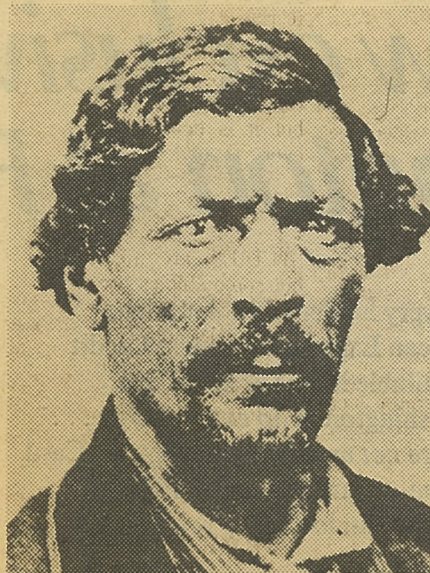
In essence, wrote Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones in "The Negro Cowboys," their lives were "like those of all other cowboys — hard and dangerous. The point of their history (in the West) is not that they were different from their companions, but that they were similar. The demands of their jobs made them transcend prejudice. Where there are more jobs than men to fill them, there is less discrimination."

These Negro cowboys, true to human nature, boasted both "good guys" and "bad guys" in their ranks. Typical of the mean critters was Ben Hodges, a Dodge City cattle thief and con man who was finally put to rest beside the town's leading businessmen in a white cemetery in 1929. "We wanted Ben right here," a town official explained, "where we can keep an eye on him." "Cherokee Bill," a handsome Negro bandit and ladykiller who was hanged at 20, reputedly made Billy the Kid look like "small potatoes."

On the credit side of the ledger (well, mostly) were gents like Barney Ford and James P. Beckwourth.

¶ Eye Out for Gold

Barney was a runaway slave who hit Colorado in 1860 with an eye out for gold, and at least one lifetime of excitement already behind him. Barney had operated a station of the Underground Railroad in Chicago, and occasionally went roaming with old John Brown.



Jack Beckwourth, legendary pioneer, trapper and explorer who founded Pueblo, Colo.

Barney didn't fancy mouldering in the grave, tho. He went to Nicaragua and made and lost a fortune in the hotel business. Broke but unabashed, he figured the West was ripe for him. He found gold in Colorado, too, but outlaws drove him off his claim. He made his next fortune by investing the little gold he salvaged in building another hotel — the Inter-Ocean, which still stands in Denver today. In its time it was the poshest watering place between St. Louis and the coast.

For some reason, local folks felt sure Barney's long green at the hotel was just a

coverup for gold he'd found earlier. They were convinced he'd stashed the gold in a hill nearby. Barney denied the story to no avail.

¶ Tough Trader

James P. Beckwourth was the most legendary character among Negroes who pioneered the West. The son of a white Revolutionary War officer and a slave mother, Mr. Beckwourth was a two-fisted, tough trader and trapper. He was jailed at least once for killing a man, but was acquitted on a self-defense plea.

After settling and naming what is now Pueblo, Colo., Mr. Beckwourth moved farther into the wilderness and discovered the lowest crossing of the Sierra Nevadas. Located at U. S. Alt. 40, it's now known as Beckwourth Pass.

He lived hard and colorfully and many legends have sprung up about him. The best of them is that Mr. Beckwourth "passed" among the Crow Indians as a war chief. They accepted the Negro—still an odium among their people — as a "good luck" symbol. This both helped Mr. Beckwourth's trading business and sealed his doom.

The story has it that when he decided to leave the tribe, the Crows gave him a true "farewell" dinner. They poisoned his stew to keep their good luck with them, forever and ever amen.

Some folks say the truth is more pedestrian — that Mr. Beckwourth died on a trail before he even rendezvoused with the Crow Indians — but then, some folks would say anything to ruin a good story.

(NEXT: "The Dark Ages.")