

reveals the role of blacks in the West, it focuses on the multi-faceted significance of the West to black history.

First, like white Americans, blacks migrated West to seek their fortunes. Frederick Douglass, for example, encouraged blacks to make their fortunes in the gold fields of California. "Labor rules capital there," his newspaper reported. "A Negro is just as good as a polished gentleman and can make more money."

Yet, at the same time, the West meant something quite different to each race. The frontier's challenges to whites--isolation, an unsettled social order, ethnic diversity, and a rugged environment--represented opportunities for African Americans.

The frontier offered an escape from the poverty and racist oppression Back East. And its open environs, says historian Kenneth Porter, allowed African Americans to challenge the 19th century doctrine that they were unsuited to the rigors of frontier life.

In fact, the dual 20th century strategies of integration versus separatism were actually pioneered in the West. On the one hand, notes Philip Durham, frontier life required communal cooperation, offering less opportunity for discrimination and segregation. Cattle ranching, he points out, was among the most integrated industries of the 19th century.

At the same time, frontier life demanded both individual initiative and self-reliance. Black nationalism, a doctrine often associated with Malcolm X, was first attempted three-quarters of a century earlier in Oklahoma by black land promoter Edward McCabe. "I expect," he wrote in 1891, "to have a Negro population of over 100,00 in Oklahoma and we will have a Negro state governed by Negroes." Though ultimately unsuccessful, McCabe and others founded several self-sufficient all-black communities.

In fact, the story begins much earlier, at the very beginning of western history. The narrative of the black West is both familiar and foreign; paralleling the well-known chronicle of western development but casting it into a new and distinctive light.

The first stage involved contact between the indigenous peoples of the region and the newcomers--of African as well as European descent. The very first 'conquistador' to search for El Dorado in the Southwest was a Spanish-speaking African named Estabanico. In the 1540's, his superiors in Mexico City ordered him to send back bigger and bigger crosses so they could track his progress. When the crosses stopped coming, they presumed he died. A legend among the Zuni Indians of New Mexico, however, says he joined their nation.

He wouldn't be the last to do so. Three hundred years later, James Beckwourth--army scout, furtrapper and Sierra Nevada trailblazer--became a black chief of the Crow nation. Rumor had it that when he threatened to leave, they killed him rather than let him serve with a rival tribe.

Resource exploitation followed exploration and, again, the story of the African American West both parallels and diverges from the familiar history