



By 1860, fifty percent of the black population in Texas, Indian Territory, Utah Territory and the Pacific Northwest were African American women. During the Gold Rush in California, there was a large imbalance in the number of black men and black women.

(PHOTO COURTESY OF OHS)

for two years served as a Buffalo Soldier, earning a medal for bravery. And no one could forget Stagecoach Mary Fields, who stood at over 6 feet tall. She traveled West in 1884 to aid Ursuline nuns and settled in Cascade, Montana Territory, where she became a driver for Wells Fargo, one of the state's first postmasters, and was noted for her ability to hold her liquor.

Of course, many of the intrepid souls who ventured West, no matter their color, are remembered only because western culture thrives today from their effort. Horace Greeley's bigoted ambition for the western territories was thwarted even as he spoke, and the strength of character, inventiveness and vision that formed the West can be credited to blacks as well as whites, to women as well as men.

Karyn Follis Cheatham is the author of "The Adventures of Elizabeth Fortune," a nouveau Western book that deals with race and gender of the post-Civil War American West.

family won a legal battle for their freedom and stayed in southern California. Mason, a skilled midwife and herbalist, built an empire by investing in real estate. She was one of the first women of color, under American rule, to own a home. By the 1870s, she was a wealthy woman and never forgot the hardships she had suffered. Her home was always open to people who needed shelter, no matter their race; she helped found the First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles; she established charitable operations during the 1880 flood.

Philanthropists and rags-to-riches stories usually get recorded, and there are several black women who fill this category. Among them, along with Bidy Mason, are Clara Brown, who made several fortunes in Colorado Territory real estate in the mid-19th century and helped hundreds of blacks

settle in the Central City region; businesswoman-activist Mary Ellen Pleasance was co-founder of the first Bank of California, developed shelters for abused women and aided fugitive slaves.

Several black western women did not amass a fortune, but created such a unique impression that they are remembered even today. Elvira Conley started her western life as a successful laundress in rough-and-tumble Sheridan, Kansas. Among her friends were Wild Bill Hickok and other notables of the late 1860s. Cathey Williams moved West as a girl with her mother and sisters. Lured by military pay and adventure, she changed her name to William Cathey, and

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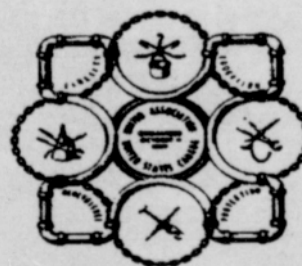
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