

# 1st black known in area came with Spaniards

Estebanico, the Moorish slave of Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca who traveled with him through the Southwest in 1536, is the first known black in the area that is today El Paso.

And, artist and historian Jose Cisneros says, blacks surely were at North America's first recorded celebration of Thanksgiving — in 1598, when Juan de Oñate's party camped on the banks of the Rio Grande near San Elizario in El Paso's Lower Valley.

Before the Civil War, several blacks — ranchers, laborers, merchants and other free men — appeared on the 1860 federal census, the first census to include a head count of the newly organized El Paso County. Slavery was practiced in El Paso County with sales listed in early legal records. Some of the slaves belonged to Confederate troops sent west to secure Fort Bliss. But only a few slaves were traded, showing that the institution was not widespread or important in El Paso. Only 305 blacks were counted in the 1870 census of El Paso County, among them black soldiers.

A 1986 University of Texas at El Paso honors program paper, "The Forgotten Color" by Charlotte Ivy, names among those early free blacks John Woods and William Alexander Henderson. Woods, who came during the Civil War, prospered, and by 1869 he owned a saloon, a boarding house, a blacksmith shop on the town square, horses, a buggy and an ambulance. He cast the first bell for what now is the Pro Cathedral Church of St. Clement.

Henderson, who came to El Paso as a guide for the Army during the Indian wars, acquired land holdings that included where Thomason Hospital and the Union Depot stand today.

But the first homogenous group of blacks to arrive in El Paso came with the iron horse. There was employment on the cars and in the yards of the Southern Pacific, the Texas and Pacific, the Northern Rail Line, the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe and the Southern Mexican

Please see **1st black, / 11F**

# 1st black

Continued from 1F

lines.

Because there were no ordinances that designated all-black areas in the city, as there were in other Texas cities, railroad families settled randomly in neighborhoods along and east of the tracks beside Anglo, Mexican and Chinese neighbors.

By 1883, the still few black families in the city started a private school under the tutelage of a black professor, Andrew Morelock. Classes met in the home of Joseph J. Smith at Mills and Stanton, later in a black church building on Seventh and finally at Fourth and Kansas. Named Franklin School and eventually renamed in honor of Frederick Douglass, leading spokesman for blacks in the United States in the 19th century, it was taken into the El Paso public school system by



The first black school in El Paso was named for Frederick Douglass, the leading spokesman for blacks in the United States in the 19th century. This photo of Douglass school students was taken in 1912.

1889. In 1920, Douglass moved to a new building at its current location, 101 S. Eucalyptus.

Churches, long the lifeline of the black family, were organized even earlier than the school. The first denomination established was the Christian Methodist Church, led by the Rev. Thomas Grigsby.

Services had been held by that congregation for some time when the Rev. E.M. Griggs, a Baptist missionary from Dallas, arrived in 1884. He learned that 15 of the 25 blacks in El Paso were attending Grigsby's services, and among them were five Baptists. Soon, the five withdrew to form the nucleus of the Second Baptist Church and the original group became the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The Methodist-Episcopal group bought a lot and built an adobe building on South Florence, which they named Visitors' Chapel. The Baptists' first home was a rented room on South Stanton between San Antonio and Overland.

Fraternal organizations came next, with male church members forming a benevolent association, Myrtle Lodge 10, Knights of Pythias, Sunset Lodge 76 of Free and Accepted Masons (Prince Hall Affiliation) was formed in 1892.

Giels Bundy Grimes, a longtime El Paso educator who wrote "A Black-Centennial Capsule" for the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial Black History Week commemorative booklet, listed pioneer people. She included the fabled Henry O. Flipper, first black graduate (1877) of the U.S. Military Academy. In 1882, his military career behind him, Flipper came to El Paso to work for a Mexican mining company and remained in the border city until 1919.

Black El Paso medical men included Dr. George A. Lewis, who came with the first families; Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon, whose arrival during the first decade of the 20th century began a practice that lasted almost 60 years; and Drs. Vernon Collins Sr. and Jr., graduates of Douglass School.

In his book, "Dr. Lawrence A.

Nixon and the White Primary," author Conrey Bryson describes El Paso as "more Western than Southern." There was, he pointed out, a mixture of segregation and desegregation: Some restaurants and hotels made blacks welcome, others did not; blacks could buy homes in certain areas of town and not in others; and, while blacks were admitted to movie houses and theaters, seating was restricted to whites-only on the main floor and blacks in the balcony.

In the days when railroad travel was a popular choice for everyone, historian Ivy points out that going West from El Paso, trains offered desegregated cars. However, running east from El Paso, into the South, had only "Jim Crow cars" — less desirable, segregated accommodations — for blacks.

"El Paso was a gateway to the West; for the black it was where the 'Jim Crow' train coach disappeared," she says.

New Mexico State University (then New Mexico A&M College) was the only university in the El Paso area open to blacks.

Teachers at Douglass, the only school in which blacks could teach, drove the distance several days a week to work on their master's degrees at the Las Cruces college.

Ivy says that Juarez also was a positive influence on the black social scene. Denied the opportunity to entertain in El Paso's nice restaurants, blacks always could take their friends across the border. Entertainment stars, some known and loved internationally, were unable to register and stay in major hotels in El Paso. They found accommodations — and often even higher accolades — in Juarez, however.

By 1910, El Paso's black population was 1,562; in 1920, only 1,330; and in 1930, 1,855.

In order to make things better for this small minority, El Paso's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was founded in the second decade of the century by Nixon, L.W. Washington, Le Roy White and others.

Texas blacks had found themselves disenfranchised by the

state legislature's 1923 in excluding them from the Democratic Party. With the El Paso N behind him, Nixon went challenge the all-white I the courts. After years of personal struggle and much early preparation, the El physician won for all bla the United States full ci ship and the right to with a U.S. Supreme ruling that finally can 1944.

Other civil rights car 1955, when the El Paso pendent School District bo trustees voluntarily school segregation, bec the first major distric Texas to do so. That same blacks were admitted to Texas Western College, no University of Texas at El

In the early 1960s, b were admitted to all p accommodations in El Pa restaurants, motels, m wherever the general p was welcomed, another for the Sun City. El F public housing was open blacks in 1969.