

Blacks' impact was felt

Many came as soldiers, stayed

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Blacks who moved west after the Civil War found a safe haven in a small desert community on the Rio Grande, historians say.

Black soldiers from the Indian Wars and black settlers arrived in El Paso in the 1870s and paved the way for what today represents about 4 percent of the El Paso population.

But despite their small number, blacks have played an important role in the development of the El Paso area, longtime black residents said. The contributions are being acknowledged during February's observance of Black History Month.

Esteban the Moor was probably the first black in the El Paso area in 1536, according to El Paso historian Tom Lea. He came with the Spanish explorer and soldier Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca.

The first blacks to settle in the area came after the Civil War. Most of them, like the grandfather of longtime El Paso resident Frances Hills, came as soldiers and, after retiring, settled in the Segundo Barrio.

William Henderson came to El Paso from Virginia as an Army scout. He was discharged in 1878 and settled here, Hills said. He had been separated from his family in Virginia before the war.

Henderson was baptized in the Rio Grande in 1896, when he joined the Second Baptist Church and married Lucinda Godfrey from Wharton, Texas.

He was a rider for the Pony Express and later owned and sold the lands for the Union Passenger Station and Yards. He also donated the land where Thomason Hospital now stands, records show.

Hills' mother was born in El Paso and attended Douglass School, the only school for blacks in the city at the time. Hills' father, like many other blacks in the early 1900s, came to El Paso as a blacksmith for Southern Pacific.

Hills grew up in South El Paso among Mexican children and learned to speak Spanish. At that time, she had her first encounters with segregation.

Mexicans then were classified as white and were not segregated. But blacks had an all-black school, an all-black movie theater, all-black hotels and all-black businesses.

"I didn't understand then why my friends went to Alamo (School) and I went to Douglass," Hills said. "My mother was a teacher in Douglass, and my explanation was I had to go with her."

Leona Washington, another native El Pasoan, said things were not as bad here, but still blacks tended to socialize together.

"Growing up, we had all of our social and religious functions

Church was an important institution, but it was Douglass School, founded in 1883 by Andrew Morelock, that was the point of convergence for black families. They all sent their children to Douglass.

When Hills was growing up, segregation bothered her. But her college days in Alabama made her yearn for her life in El Paso.

In her senior year in Alabama, someone burned a cross in the front lawn of the university. She came back home after her 1945 graduation.

"I didn't consider doing graduate work in any other area," Hills said.

The military brought many blacks to El Paso, and its presence made segregation less strict. Many soldiers came from the north and did not put up with it, Washington said.

"A group of soldiers got on a streetcar that used to go all the way up to Fort Bliss, but the driver wouldn't move until they all got in the back," Hills said. "So finally, the soldiers told him off: 'If we are good enough to die for our country, we are good enough to ride in the streetcar comfortably.' And they rode in the front."

Despite incidents like this, Washington agrees with Hills that El Paso has been a good place for blacks to live.

"I wouldn't live any place else," she said "The opportunities here are better, because if you really want something, you can get it."

Life might have been good for black El Pasoans, but it wasn't as pleasant for those who were just passing through.

Blacks coming from the West had to get off in Anthony, N.M., to move to a "Jim Crow" car, a blacks only car. Geographically, El Paso was the first segregated city in Texas. Going back West, the train again stopped in Anthony, but blacks weren't encouraged to mingle with the white passengers.

Desegregation in El Paso went so smoothly that sometimes the transition was hardly even noticed, Hills said.

"A lot of things were just dropped," she said. "Someone just scratched the 'colored' signs in the buses and nobody said anything."

Before the smooth transition, blacks like Dr. L. A. Nixon battled the white establishment to protect their constitutional rights.

The El Paso doctor, helped by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, won a landmark case that would give blacks the right to vote in the Democratic primary.

Nixon had been denied the right to vote in the 1923 Democratic primary election because he was black. In 1927, the Supreme Court ruled that the "white primary" was unconstitutional.

Later, the Democratic State Committee made up eligibility rules that in effect only qualified white Democrats. Once more, Nixon tried to register, was denied the right and his case made it to the Supreme Court.

In 1932, Justice Benjamin Cardozo wrote that it was the Court's duty to topple barriers of color and ruled in Nixon's favor.