

Book Reviews

Michael D. Gibson, Book Review Editor

Blacks in Gold Rush California, by Rudolph M. Lapp. New Haven and London: Yale Western Americana Series, 29. Yale University Press, 1977. pp. xiv, 321. Illustrations, notes, and index. \$15.00.

In March of 1855, a young Iowan named Benjamin Bowen, his father, brother, and their black partner, George W. Mason, were working their mining claim in Amador County, California, when a group of white miners began harassing blacks in the area. One black miner, deciding to flee rather than risk trouble, came by the Bowen cabin to dispose of some books and told young Bowen that he had been ordered by the whites to leave his claim. A meeting of miners apparently averted a more serious crisis, but Bowen observed in his journal that the arbitrary eviction notice was the work of whites "hungry" for the diggings of the black miners. (pp. 59-60) This book is a history of blacks in California "hungry" for opportunities both in and out of the mines during the decade prior to the Civil War.

When gold was discovered in 1848, there were no more than a few dozen black people in California. Four years later, the flood-tide of migration had carried more than 2,000 blacks into the state. Lapp recounts the story of those blacks who worked in the mines alongside whites, like George W. Mason, and those who banded together or isolated themselves in remote areas to avoid problems with the riffraff who became notorious for driving Mexicans, Chinese, and blacks from prosperous claims. He also details the story of those blacks who found work outside the mines, most often in San Francisco and Sacramento, as laborers, servants, and cooks, and those few who gained prominence as businessmen and merchants. The 1849 constitution outlawed slavery in the state, but with the arrival of slaves who came to work claims for their masters, and sometimes for their freedom, the legal status of blacks came into question. This legal question and others pertaining to fugitive slaves, the right of blacks to give testimony, and the right to tax-supported education all form a part of Lapp's study. As evidence of the confused state of the legal status of blacks, Lapp cites the celebrated case of Archy Lee, who sued his master for his freedom, was recognized to be in the right by the state supreme court, but who was nevertheless ordered to return with his master to the South since this was "the first case of its kind." (p. 149) A federal commissioner finally overturned the decision and freed Lee. Lapp devotes two of the eleven chapters to the organized efforts of California blacks to secure constitutional rights through the Colored Convention move-

ment. He also follows many of these black pioneers in their emigration to Victoria, British Columbia, in their search for equal protection under the law.

The book is a chronological narrative, but this strength is offset by a loose geographical organization that finds the reader jumping from the mines to the cities to Southern California and back to the northern cities and thence to British Columbia. Perhaps the nature of the source material which Lapp himself observes was "as thinly scattered throughout the usual research resources as the imagination can conceive," (p. 307) made it difficult to find strong organizing threads. The preliminary research was begun in the 1950s and when published under the same title, in greatly abbreviated form, in the *Journal of Negro History* in April, 1964, relied heavily on census data. Lapp has done a thorough job of fleshing out those bare bones with new information from journals, diaries, memoirs, directories, and church records. The material presented here significantly augments and expands the small space Kenneth G. Goode was able to give the gold rush period in *California's Black Pioneers: A Brief Historical Survey* (Santa Barbara, 1974). The broader scope of both W. Sherman Savage's *Blacks in the West* (Westport, Conn., 1976) and William Loren Katz's *The Black West* (Garden City, N.Y., 1973) naturally precludes the kind of detail that Lapp's book displays. Still, he might have taken a lesson from the latter in selecting illustrations if Lapp truly "meant this book for the general reader as much as for the professional historian" (p. xi) as he claims in the preface.

Despite these minor problems, *Blacks in Gold Rush California* is an important contribution to the recovery of the history of blacks in the West, a process that will lead someday to a re-evaluation of the frontier in American culture.

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Indian-White Relations: A Persistent Paradox, edited by Jane F. Smith and Robert M. Kvasnicka. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1976. pp. xx, 278, \$15.00.

Interest in American Indian studies has been manifested in many ways in the last decade. Organizations have sprung to life to promote research and publications of the "Indian side" of American history, to provide a forum for Indian demands for political and economic self determination, and even to stress the virtues of a "back to the blanket" philosophy. Universities and colleges around the country have introduced courses that focus on Indian leadership, cultural traits, and Indian-white relationships. And conferences have been held to acquaint American Indians with their heritage and the challenges they face in a rapidly changing world. In line with this trend, the federal government sponsored a two-day conference in Washington, D.C., in

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