

Introduction

African Americans in Montana and the West

BLACK HISTORY MATTERS. This special digital issue of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* focuses on African American history in Montana and the diversity of Black experiences in the West. Well-known African Americans like York, enslaved by William Clark and member of the Corps of Discovery, or country music star Charley Pride spent time in Montana, but it is less famous African Americans who significantly shaped Montana’s history from territorial days into the twenty-first century. African Americans homesteaded, worked in mining camps, wrangled cows, founded businesses, built neighborhoods and cultural institutions, served in the armed forces, raised families, and advocated for civil rights. Black women worked as maids, nurses, and librarians, ran for public office, and formed civic organizations. But, as elsewhere in the United States, they built their communities within the framework of racial inequality inherent to the larger African American experience. We draw attention to this history with a selection of articles from the past two decades of *Montana The Magazine of Western History* along with excerpts from two MHS Press books, *Beyond Schoolmarms and Madams: Montana Women’s Stories* (2014) and *Border to Border: Historic Quilts and Quiltmakers of Montana* (2009).

This issue opens with a biography of Sarah Gammon Bickford. Born into enslavement, she later became a leading businesswoman in Montana, owning the Virginia City Water Company from 1902 until her sudden death in 1931. In 2012, the State of Montana inducted Bickford into the Gallery of Outstanding Montanans in the Capitol Rotunda. Following this biography, John Langellier’s “Buffalo Soldiers in Big Sky Country, 1888–1898,” examines the history of Black soldiers in Montana, often referred to as “Buffalo Soldiers,” including the Twenty-Fourth and Twenty-Fifth Infantry and the Ninth and Tenth

Cavalry. From Fort Missoula to Fort Keogh to San Juan Hill and the Philippines, these troops shaped Montana’s history and that of the world. After their service, many remained in Montana and built dynamic Black communities.

Next are the stories of two notable women homesteaders who left indelible marks on their rural communities. Agnes “Annie” Morgan homesteaded near Philipsburg in the early 1890s, and her cabin is now owned by the U. S. Forest Service as the Morgan-Case Homestead. Bertie Brown settled near Lewistown in 1898 and filed a homesteading claim near Brickyard Creek in 1907, proving up in 1912. She raised chickens, grew vegetables, and distilled a county-famous moonshine reputed for its quality even during Prohibition.

Helena’s Black community, largely built by retired Buffalo Soldiers and their families, flourished during the early twentieth century. Anthony Wood explores their contributions in “After the West Was Won: How African American Buffalo Soldiers Invigorated the Helena Community in Early Twentieth-Century Montana,” arguing that soldiers who mustered out at Fort Harrison helped build the economic and social fabric of the city into the 1930s through newspapers, businesses, social clubs, and pressure for equal rights. At its height in the early twentieth century, over four hundred African Americans lived in Helena, most of whom worked in the service economy. A variety of factors drew most Black residents away from Helena by the 1940s.

We follow this article with three short pieces on women. Mamie Anderson Bridgewater came to Helena after marrying Samuel Bridgewater, a Buffalo Soldier. She worked as a matron at the Fort Harrison Veterans Hospital. Octavia, their daughter, became a nurse and, during World War II, joined the Army Nurse Corps, earning the rank of first lieutenant. Bridgewater returned to Helena after the war and

worked in St. Peter's Hospital's maternity department until her retirement in the 1960s. Octavia also served as the treasurer of the Montana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs beginning in 1971. Formed in 1921, the Colored Women's Clubs sought "to encourage true womanhood" and to "promote interest in social uplift," with the cause of civil rights as their main mission. Finally, Emma Louise Riley Smith was a well-known and talented quiltmaker. Born in Arkansas, she moved to Liberia with her family as a young girl. She returned to the United States, first making her way to Butte and then living in Lewistown and Great Falls. Several of her quilts are in the Montana Historic Quilts Project collection of the Montana Historical Society, and her quilts are featured as part of this digital issue.

The next article, "Born to Be Published: Ivan Doig and Taylor Gordon" by Laura Ferguson, discusses the life of singer E. Taylor Gordon from White Sulphur Springs, who went on to a musical career during the Harlem Renaissance and then published a memoir of his life, *Born to Be*. In the late 1960s, Montana author Ivan Doig interviewed Taylor Gordon and later used details of Gordon's life as a basis for a character in his novel *Prairie Nocturne*. After Gordon's death in 1971, Doig ensured that the family's papers were archived at the Montana Historical Society. Gordon's sister, Rose, had a less public but equally fascinating life as a business owner, nurse and physiotherapist, talented singer, and prolific writer for the *Meagher County News*. Rose Gordon offered numerous memorial tributes to the citizens of White Sulphur Springs and was known as White Sulphur Springs's "heart and historian." A short biography of Rose Gordon is included in this special issue, and MHS Press is publishing a biography of Rose, *A Black Woman's West: The Life of Rose B. Gordon* by Michael Johnson in 2021.

Many Montana cities had thriving Black communities, and Great Falls was no exception. Two articles highlight this history. Alma Smith Jacobs was born in Lewistown, and her family moved to Great Falls. She attended Talladega College and Columbia University, earning bachelor's degrees in sociology and library science. She returned to Great Falls and eventually became the head librarian of the Great Falls Public Library, before becoming the Montana State Librarian in 1973. Her sister, Lucille Smith Thompson, was

a reference librarian at Montana State University, and together they co-authored a catalog of resources on the state's Black history, *The Negro in Montana: 1800-1945*, published in 1970. Accompanying the biography of Jacobs is Ken Robison's "Breaking Racial Barriers: 'Everyone's Welcome' at the Ozark Club, Great Falls, Montana's African American Nightclub," which describes the history of the Ozark Club in the Southside district of Great Falls, a "Colored" social club that opened in 1909. During Prohibition, the Ozark Club served soft drinks above the table and alcohol with a wink and a nod, while offering gambling on the side. As Great Falls's Black population expanded with World War II, the Ozark Club saw a rise in patronage, operating under the motto "Everyone's Welcome," catering to an interracial crowd, and featuring a talented house band. The Ozark Club was a pivotal space for community formation and took the lead in welcoming everyone in the community, building ties throughout the city.

To conclude, Kate Hampton of the State Historical Preservation Office reports on the past fifteen years of Montana's African American Heritage Resources Project and its future. Two historiographic essays consider the state of the field of Western African American History, with Quintard Taylor's classic 1996 essay, "From Esteban to Rodney King: Five Centuries of African American History in the West," arguing for the place of Black history in New Western history. Herbert Ruffin II demonstrates the fruitfulness of that approach and updates us on the state of the field in "African Americans in Western Historiography Since 2000," discussing new works, directions, and goals for historians today.

While reminiscing about her life in White Sulphur Springs from 1883 to 1968, Rose Gordon wrote, "It is a great adventure to be born with dark skin." Beyond remembering Black individuals who called Montana home, this issue is an invitation for students, researchers, and historians to delve more deeply into African American history in Montana and the West, a history too often overlooked and undervalued. As Michael Van Wagenen wrote in his Summer 2020 *Montana* article, "Undoubtedly, there is still much work to be done."

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