Blacks in the Wild West

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On July 4, 1876, at Deadwood City in the Dakota Territory, he entered a rodeo. After winning several roping and shooting contests, Love wrote, "Right there the assembled crowd named me 'Deadwood Dick' and proclaimed me champion roper of the Western Cattle Country."

Bill Pickett of the 101 Ranch. One of the most noted black cowboys of the old West.

Around 1890, Love left the range and finally settled in Los Angeles, where he worked for the railroad and wrote his life's story. He most likely died with his boots off, but young Cherokee Bill probably wore his at the time of his hanging at age 20.

Known for his good looks, charm and wit, Cherokee Bill was one of the West's worst villains. He was born of mixed black, Indian and white heritage at Fort Concho, Texas in 1876.

"...an outlaw who fascinated women, murdered countless men for fun and profit and died on the gallows only a month after his twentieth birthday ... Bill began his short career at the age of 14 when he shot and killed his brother-in-law.

"After that, he became a professional killer, shooting railroad agents, Indian police, express agents, and storekeepers. He rode with a gang specializing in the armed robbery of stores, trains, and express offices.

"He killed casually and gleefully and inspired fear and horror throughout the Indian Territory."

Other blacks who lived in the old West were outlaws Isom Dart, a former Arkansas slave who later became a horse thief and Ben Hodges, a "notorious cattle thief and confidence man."

In Wyoming, Mary Fields, said to be a giant of a woman, ran a stage coach and mail route. Jim Perry was a cook, fiddler and an all-around cowboy.

Isaiah Dorman was a black scout and interpreter for the U.S. Army and was the only black to die in General Custer's ill-fated battle at the Little Big Horn.

He was hired bo the Custer party in the Dakota Territory just six weeks before the battle. One author has described Dorman as a "daring and reliable courier and interpreter at Fort Rice for many years."

Married to an Indian woman, Dorman's body was recovered by relief troops who arrived at the scene on June 27, 1876, two days after the historic battle.

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of such people as Everett and Durham and Paul Stewart and Kathryne McKinney, both of Denver, blacks who lived and died in the old West are not forgotten.

Stewart, who grew up in Clinton, Iowa, said he enjoyed the game of cowboys and Indians as a child, but never was allowed to play the role of the cowboy.

"They'd say to me, Paul, there ain't no such thing as a black cowboy," Stewart said of his young playmates.

Unsatisfied, Stewart has spent much of his life hunting the tales of the West's black pioneers and residents. What he discovered was a legacy rich in the lives of stage coach drivers, saloon keepers, miners (Isom Dart was an unsuccessful miner), journalists, farmers and more cowboys than you could shake a stick at.

During the years of his search, Stewart, now 57, conducted about 800 tape-recorded interviews with black pioneers. That and other memorabilia he has collected now is housed at the Black American West Museum — two rooms in the basement of a city-owned building in East Denver.

A barber by trade, Stewart has learned to be a museum curator. he has maintained his museum in various locations during the past 12 years and has received funds for its support from the federal government, Colorado art and historic groups, and international corporations.

"But the museum's survival depends for the most part on the work of Mr. Stewart and some 150 community volunteers, who help catalog old newspaper clippings, more than 15,000 photographs and some of the 6,000 different items collected over the years from black Western families."

Mrs. McKinney, president of the Barney Ford Memorial Association, worked with her members to honor Isaiah Dorman. A white marble marker was placed along the Little Big Horn River in Montana on June 25, 1983 to honor Dorman as the only black member of Custer's 7th Calvary.

The Barney Ford Memorial Association is named for an ex-slave who settled in the Colorado Territory and worked to assure that Colorado joined the Union as a free state.

He later became a prominent builder and member of the Colorado Supreme Court.

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