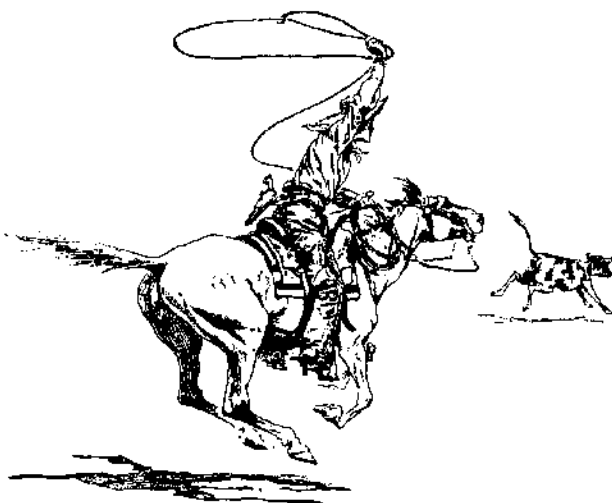

HERITAGE OF THE BLACK WEST



CFE 3251V

OPEN CAPTIONED
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
SOCIETY

1995

Grade Levels: 7-10

25 minutes

DESCRIPTION

African Americans played a significant role in shaping the American West as frontiersmen and frontierswomen, “buffalo soldiers,” cowboys, lawmakers, lawbreakers, farmers, and entrepreneurs. Historical roots are reflected through present-day cowboys on the rodeo circuit, a ranch family, and a veterinarian. Uses vintage photos.

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

- To demonstrate the prevalence of African Americans in amateur and professional rodeo today.
- To illustrate the accomplishments of African-American men and women and their effects on the shaping of the West.
- To recognize the relationship and common bonds between the Native Americans and the African Americans during the early days of the Western movement.

BEFORE SHOWING

1. Preview the video to determine unfamiliar vocabulary and language concepts.

2. Read *Wagon Wheels* by Barbara Brenner. Discuss how the characters in the story faced great dangers to help settle a town in Kansas.

3. Using a map of North America in the year 1845, identify the existing unexplored land between Missouri and the Pacific Ocean. Compare the settled land with that which was unexplored.

DURING SHOWING

1. View the video more than once, with one showing uninterrupted.

2. Pause the video after the section on Hollywood films.
 - a. Discuss why Hollywood might have portrayed African Americans inaccurately in the films.
 - b. Discuss the pros and cons of making all-black films for the African-American audience.
3. Pause the video after the section in which Native Americans are portrayed as savages and enemies. Discuss how the relationship between Native Americans and African Americans developed.
4. Pause the video after the section about “buffalo soldiers.”
 - a. Describe the conflict the soldiers might have felt as proud U.S. soldiers assigned the task of defeating the Native Americans.
 - b. Identify why these soldiers were given this name.

AFTER SHOWING

1. Based on information from the video, design a time line of major events in the history of African Americans of the West.
2. Identify the careers of the African Americans shown in the video:
 - a. Wendell Baker
 - b. Bass Reeves
 - c. Biddy Mason
 - d. Bill Pickett
 - e. Nat Love
 - f. James P. Beckwourth
 - g. Cleo Hearn
 - h. York
3. Using a computer software program, print a map of North America. Draw the United States as it existed in 1865 and the territories to be traveled.
4. Discuss the reasons African Americans chose to move west after the Civil War.
5. Discuss how owning land meant a person was successful in the 1800s.
 - a. Is this true today?

- b. In what other ways does our society measure success?
- 6. Research the life of an African-American figure in the West. Write a resumé for this individual. Include background information, skills, and areas of expertise.
- 7. Discuss the different names for Native Americans that have been used over time.
 - a. Compare these with names used for African Americans.
 - b. Discuss the importance of respectfully using preferred names for groups of people.
 - c. Discuss responses to a peer, a relative, or a stranger using inappropriate descriptive words.
- 8. With a partner, play one of the computer games related to life on the frontier or journeys on the Oregon Trail.
- 9. Research deaf African-American contributions to the West. Refer to *Deaf Heritage* by Jack Gannon and *Deaf Women: A Parade Through the Decades* by Mabs Holcomb and Sharon Wood.
- 10. Write a how-to manual on riding a bronco, roping a calf, or barrel racing.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- 1. Imagine being a deaf African-American pioneer in the 1800s.
 - a. Develop a list of practical signs for the journey.
 - b. Record experiences in a journal.
 - c. Write letters to family and friends at home.
- 2. Sacajawea used sign language to communicate with other tribes. Research the sign language of the Plains Native Americans. Sources include:
 - a. *North American Indian Sign Language* by Karen Liptak.
 - b. *Indian Talk* by Iron Eyes Cody.
 - c. *Indian Sign Language* by Robert Hofsinde
- 3. Using ASL, role-play an interview with one of the individuals described in the video.

WEBSITES

Explore the Internet to discover sites related to this topic. Check the CFV website for related information (<http://www.cfv.org>).

SUMMARY

Rodeo has long been considered the cowboy sport, a symbol of the American West. While it has predominantly been a “white” sport, recently more African Americans are becoming professional cowboys. Trainers such as Cleo Hearn prepare new riders for the professional rodeo circuit.

African-American cowboys have always been an important component of the history of the West. However, for years Hollywood has portrayed this segment of American history without mentioning the African-American contribution. The industry did finally move from all-white to all-black casts aimed specifically at African-American audiences. However, much of the information in the film was incorrect.

The African presence in the American West dates back to long before the cowboy era. African Americans played an important role in the settling of the West, beginning with explorers. A slave named York accompanied Lewis and Clark in 1800 on the Oregon Trail. In 1779 Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a fur trapper, established a trading post on Lake Michigan which later grew into the city of Chicago. Another explorer, James P. Beckwourth, led pioneers through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

After the Civil War, African Americans moved west in search of land, economic opportunity, and freedom from discrimination. They were instrumental in establishing cities such as Los Angeles, California; Boley and Langston City, Oklahoma; and Nicodemus and Topeka, Kansas. These early pioneers were scouts, traders, prospectors, farmers, merchants, bankers, and sheriffs.

Many of the African Americans were very successful. Barney Ford opened a hotel in Denver, only to have it burned down three times by jealous whites. He rebuilt his hotel after each burning. Bill Pickett was the most famous cowboy in the West. He invented "bulldogging," a sensational event in rodeos. Bass Reeves, a U.S. marshal, was the model for the Lone Ranger. While Reeves lived within the law, Nat Love became a hero of dime novels as an outlaw.

Meanwhile, Native Americans were portrayed as enemies and savages. A relationship developed between African Americans and Native Americans because many African Americans lived with the tribes. However, African-American troops of the 9th and 10th Cavalry helped defeat the Native Americans as they fought to keep their land. These men were called "buffalo soldiers." They were given this name because of their courage and because their hair resembled that of the buffalo.

Today, African Americans continue to make an impact in the West. Many ranches are owned and operated by African Americans. Veterinarians such as Wendell Baker provide a much-needed service to ranchers. He believes more African Americans should study veterinary medicine.

For all the information that has been gathered and documented in our history regarding African Americans, there is little mention of the women, who often worked as hard or harder than men. One example is Mary Fields, who drove a mail wagon, operated her own laundry business, and was good with a gun. She once punched a man who tried to get away without paying!

Family and community are at the heart of the African-American experience in the West and can be seen in the traditional western arenas of ranching and rodeo. Until recently, that experience lay hidden, but today it's a story that can be told and celebrated as a part of every American's cultural past.