



## *This was Nevada Series*

Phillip I. Earl

### **James P. Beckwourth: Black Pioneer**

Until recent years, black pioneers have not been accorded a place in the history of the American West. Among those long-ignored black frontiersmen deserving of some consideration is James P. Beckwourth, whose only memorials are a Sierra Nevada pass on California State Highway 70 leading into Sierra Valley and a small community where he ran a trading post in the early 1850's.

Born on April 26, 1798 at Fredericksburg, Virginia, the son of an Irish-born plantation overseer and a black female slave, Beckwourth moved west with his father when still in his teens to take up land near the forks of the Missouri and the Mississippi a few miles below present-day St. Charles, Missouri. Growing up there, he moved to St. Louis in early manhood where he apprenticed himself to a blacksmith. He followed that trade for several years before signing on with a party of fur trappers heading for New Mexico. In 1823, he joined an expedition to the Rocky Mountains organized by William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry, subsequently gaining a prominent reputation as a hunter, scout, and Indian fighter. He continued in the employ of several other fur companies until 1827, whereupon he was adopted into the Crow Indian tribe. He later told his biographer that he was made a chief among the Crows for his bravery on the field of battle. We have no reason to believe otherwise, since the Indians frequently so rewarded outsiders who joined them in fighting other tribes or groups of white intruders. Beckwourth also spent some time among the Blackfoot Indians in Idaho and had an Indian wife who bore him several children.

By 1833, he had given up life as an Indian, moving on to Mexican California where he became a horse thief near San Juan Capistrano and along the Santa Ana River. He was associated with the famed Peg Leg Smith in this venture for a time, but was back in the Rockies by 1842, living with a Mexican wife and several of their children on a ranch near present-day Fountain Creek, Colorado. Four years later, he showed up in California, taking a minor part in the famed Bear Flag Revolt in June 1846. For a time thereafter, he was a dispatch rider in the Sacramento area before moving on to a placer claim in the Mother Lode.

In July 1851, he discovered the pass through the Sierra Nevada which still bears his name. At an elevation of 5,218 feet, Beckwourth Pass is the lowest crossing in the range, the pull over the crest barely making the oxen of later immigrant parties' breath hard. In August, Beckwourth laid out a route to the Truckee River and persuaded a party with seventeen wagons to leave the Truckee Trail just east of present-day Sparks, for the stream and make use of the pass. In the spring of 1852, he built a trading post a few miles west of the pass, providing whiskey, fresh meat, and other supplies to passing travelers. By 1853, Beckwourth pass was diverting ever-increasing numbers of immigrants, but Jim Beckwourth himself had moved on by that time.

By 1860, he had settled in the Denver area, married a black woman, and was engaged in the mercantile business near Cherry Creek. The woman, reputedly Denver's laundress, did not hold his interest long,

however, and he soon took to the mountains and the plains again. About 1866, he rejoined the Crows, dying among them in the North Platte country in present-day Wyoming in 1867.

Beckwourth's old cabin overlooking Sierra Valley was later used as an icehouse. In the 1880's, the Ramelli family converted the structure for use as a milk house on their ranch. With the break-up of the Ramelli holdings in recent years, a group of residents moved the building to a site just down the hill from its original location just west of the community of Beckwourth. Beckwourth Pass became an important stage and freight route when Nevada's Comstock Lode opened up in the early 1860's. Some forty years later, December 1904, the Sierra Valley-Beckwourth Pass Route was selected as the line for the Western Pacific Railroad. Four years later, the tunnel beneath the pass was completed and freight operations between Chicago and Oakland began in December 1909. Automobiles began to traverse the pass shortly after the turn of the century, but a paved road, the Feather River Highway, was not completed until August 1937.

In the last few years, a group of history-minded Californians have put up a marker on the pass commemorating Jim Beckwourth, be he remains an understandably obscure figure in history.

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**Nevada Historical Society**

1650 North Virginia Street Reno, NV. 89503

775.688.1190 [www.nvhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.nvhistoricalsociety.org)