

Feb. 11

A SALUTE TO BLACK HISTORY WEEK

Feb. 15

JAMES P. BECKWOURTH Trail Blazer - 1798-1866



James P. Beckwourth was born on a Virginia plantation—miles away from the untamed west he was destined to help conquer in future years. Although he was the son of the plantation owner, he was still a slave, and determined to gain his freedom whenever the opportunity came. The plantation owner moved to Missouri in 1810 and hired Beckwourth out to a blacksmith in St. Louis. In spite of the fact that he learned the trade, he was not pleased because he had dreams of finding freedom and adventure in the West.

The opportunity Beckwourth hoped for came in the fall of 1823 when he signed up with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. He was employed as a blacksmith, but soon proved worthy of the responsibility to purchase horses for the trappers. In 1825 he learned how to trap beavers and the next year was allowed to accompany the other trappers into Yellowstone country. This trip led to his first encounter with the Blackfoot Indians who had a reputation for being a hostile tribe. He volunteered to meet with the Blackfoot chiefs in order to establish a trading post with them. To the amazement of his fellow trappers, Beckwourth succeeded and in three weeks obtained thirty-nine packs of beaver fur from the tribe.

In September 1828 Beckwourth had his first encounter with the Crow Indians, who invited him to

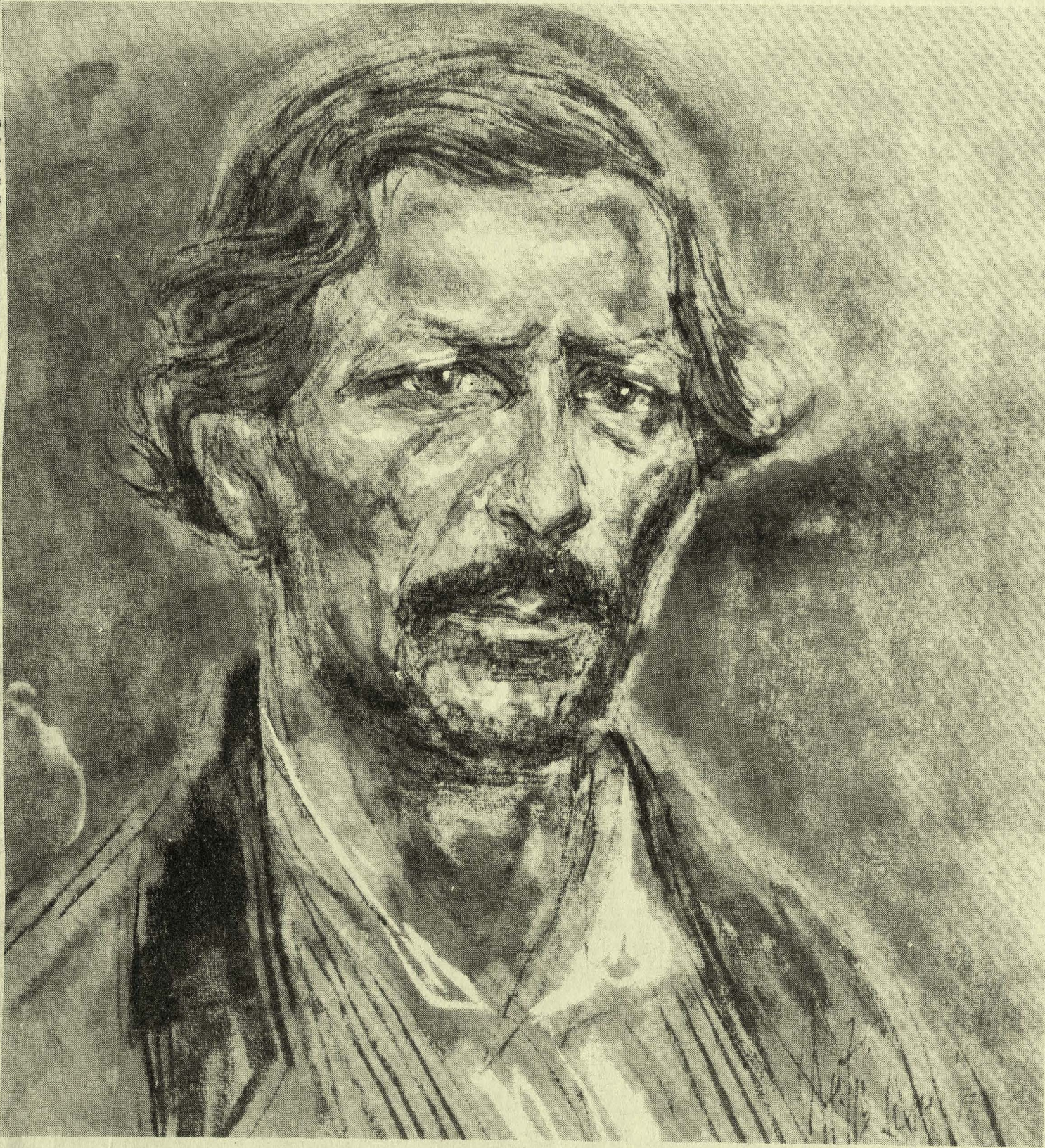
become one of them. He visited one of their villages with a trapper married to a Crow woman. The trapper told the Crows that Beckwourth was an Indian who had been captured as a small boy and raised by white people. One of the old Crow women decided that this must be her long-lost son, so Beckwourth was invited to remain as a member of the tribe. He adopted their way of life and proved himself to be a brave warrior in their battles against enemy tribes. His influence among the Crows was so great that eventually he was chosen their chief and allowed to select a wife from among their prettiest women. He lived with the Crows for six years.

For a while Beckwourth was a guide to wagon trains crossing the mountains to California. In 1844 he joined Kearney's forces in California and served as a dispatch rider in the Mexican War. Because he had roamed the Rocky Mountains as a fur trapper and knew the region so well, he became chief scout for Fremont's exploring expedition in the Rockies.

During the gold rush Beckwourth discovered a pass through the Sierra Nevada Mountains which was named after him. He laid out a trail which made it possible for thousands of settlers to pass through the mountains on their way to the gold fields of California. Beckwourth settled down for a while and operated a trading post and hotel. Then he journeyed to Denver in 1852 and settled on a ranch there.

He tried to volunteer to serve in the Civil War, but was turned down because of his age. In 1864 the Army realized that he could still be useful as a scout so he was recruited to serve with the Colorado Volunteers. In 1866 he was hired to accompany the cavalry to Montana to serve as peacemaker with the Crow Indians who would be encountered along the way. When the cavalry neared the Crow Village, Beckwourth went on ahead to talk with the chief. This proved to be the end of his long, adventurous journey for two days later he died in the chief's tent and was buried in the tribal burying ground.

Beckwourth was a skilled story teller and in his autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth* (1856), he described his experiences as a frontier trail blazer. While some of his stories may be considered the romanticized version of a mountain man's life, *Beckwourth Pass* in the Sierra Nevada Mountains is no legend. The trail he laid out was the route used by the railroad that was built through the territory in 1868. Along this route was born the city of Reno, Nevada on the banks of the Truckee River. Travelers today pick up Beckwourth's trail as they ride along U.S. 395, west of Reno on their journey to California.



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LANGSTON HUGHES Poet 1902 - 1967

Langston Hughes, one of America's most prolific writers, was born in Joplin, Missouri. The first few years of his life were spent with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. His grandmother taught him the value of pride and self respect. She carefully selected his friends and activities, primarily to protect him against the shame and embarrassment of discrimination. Nevertheless, he was forced to attend segregated schools in Lawrence and Topeka, Kansas. It was in a Topeka library that he was introduced to the wonderful world of books; and thus developed the urge to write and create his own word pictures of life. Hughes completed grammar school in Lincoln, Illinois and was the poet of his class. Throughout high school in Cleveland, Ohio, he continued to lose himself in the world of books.

After graduating from high school he went to Mexico to live with his father, and work in his father's business. During his stay in Mexico, Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" a poem which was published in *The Crisis* in 1921. Except for this creative effort, the fifteen month visit was an unpleasant one, resulting in his decision to return home.



He enrolled at Columbia University but stayed for only one year. The university did not offer the creative challenge he sought, so for a while he studied on his own and worked at odd jobs around New York City. Then he ventured on a journey which opened a new life. For three years he traveled as a seaman to West Africa, Paris, Italy and Spain.

Hughes worked his way back to New York and went to live with his family in Washington, D.C. He

spent one year working in the office of The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. His zest for life took him away from this dignified position to jobs in restaurants and laundries, which were for him, more fun. It was while working as a bus boy at the Wardman Park Hotel, that he met poet Vachel Lindsay, one of his idols. He reluctantly gave Lindsay copies of "Jazzonia", "Negro Dancers", and "Weary Blues", and asked him to read them. Hughes, who merely sought the approval of his idol, had no idea that he would become headline news. When he arrived at the hotel the next morning, reporters and cameramen were waiting to meet the "Negro bus-boy poet", whom Lindsay had discovered. The wave of popularity and the praise of his idol were heartening to the young poet. He gained acceptance as a writer, but also recognized the need to finish college. Thus, he enrolled at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and continued to study there until he graduated in 1929.

Hughes spent vacations, as well as several years after graduation, in Harlem. The mobility and excitement of the city during the 1920's provided a fitting environment for him. He loved the lights, the laughter, the sounds, and the people.

His creativity helped to make this period a renaissance. *Weary Blues*; *Fine Clothes to the Jew*; *Not Without Laughter*; and *The Ways of White Folks* were works produced during this era.

Hughes' works have appeared in many forms: national magazines; Broadway plays; movies; television; newspapers and volumes of verse. His creative efforts, which spanned forty years, included: *The Big Sea*, his autobiography written in 1940; *Shakespeare in Harlem*; *Fields of Wonder* (1947); *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950); *Laughing to Keep From Crying* (1952); *I Wonder as I Wander* (1956); *Twelve Moods for Jazz* (1962); and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967). The latter was a final collection of poetry published after his death.

In addition to the admiration and respect of many friends, Hughes also received numerous awards. Among them: The Harmon Gold Award for literature, 1930; Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing, 1935; Rosenwald fellowship, 1941; Ainsfield-Wolfe Award for the best book on race relations, 1954; NAACP's Spingarn Award, 1960. In 1961 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

Further evidence of the wide acceptance of the literary achievements of Langston Hughes is the fact that he was able to support himself entirely on professional earnings. In addition, he had the distinction of being called the "Poet Laureate of Harlem."