American literature and film are filled with icons and stories of the American West. Be it lawmen, cowboys, prospectors looking for gold, settlers hoping for success in a new land or the mythos of the Native Americans, most often than not, African Americans are not present. The few times African Americans were included in the narratives, they were black men. However, the contributions of Black women have also shaped the history and traditions of the American West. Two women stand out: Clara Brown and Mary Fields also known as “Stagecoach Mary.”

Clara Brown (1806-1888) was born into slavery in Virginia and at the young age of 3 was sold to the Brown family of Logan, Kentucky. After Master Brown died 35 year old Clara, her husband, son and daughter were sold in an estate auction to separate owners. At the age of 55, she was able to buy her freedom and headed west to St. Louis. While in St. Louis she learned of caravans headed to the gold mines of Colorado. She arranged to work as a cook and laundress for one of the caravans in exchange for transportation. Later in Colorado, Brown was able to launch a laundry business and as her wealth grew she expanded her home to serve as a hospital, church and hotel to the poor. She also aided miners who continued to come to the area during the Gold Rush. When those miners she assisted struck gold they remembered Brown by sharing a portion of their fortune with her.

At the end of the Civil War, Clara Brown was the owner of multiple Colorado properties and purported to have accumulated over $10,000 dollars in cash. She continued to amass wealth and put her money to use in via philanthropy assisting the less fortunate. Brown also searched for her relatives and was able to help more than 30 of them move west including her daughter. When she died, the Colorado Pioneers Association buried her with honors.

Mary Fields, who was also referred to as “Stagecoach Mary” and “Black Mary” (1832-1914) according to many scholars, was most likely born in Tennessee. However, most scholars readily admit that the details of her early life are difficult to pin down accurately because as Mary became legendary she “embellished her early life” (Johnson, 144). Fields worked in an Ohio convent and traveled west with nuns on a mission to Native Americans in Montana. Mary was a jack of all trades for the sisters. She served as cook, carpenter and medicinal herbalist. Mary became a gun toting legend in a confrontation with white men who were hired by the nuns after Mary refused to take orders from them. They threatened her with a whip and Mary went to her cabin and came back with a gun. This was one of many similar encounters. The word about her legendary gun skills began to spread and she was able to acquire a position as a stagecoach driver for Wells Fargo. She became known as “Stagecoach Mary, shotgun at her side, revolver in her belt” (Ibid, 146). Mary was also known to visit saloons, drink heavily (Johnson) and gamble, all of which became part of her legend. She has been the subject of songs, and has appeared as a character in the 2012 movie Hannah’s Law and in the western short, They Die by Dawn.
REFERENCES


