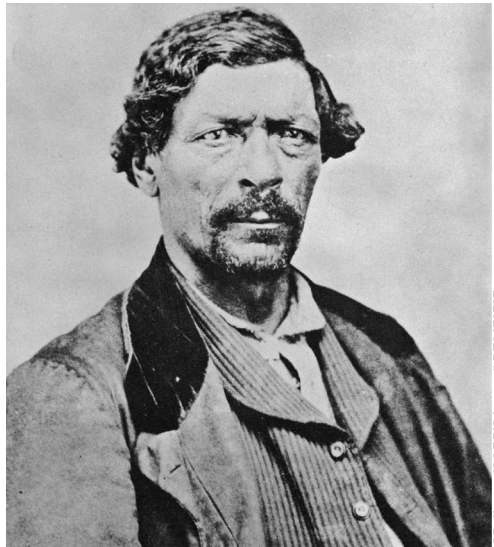


Directions: Read the selection and answer the questions that follow.

The Yarn Spinner

- 1 In the early American West, tall tales were told over a cup of black coffee and a plate of bacon and beans. These oral histories told stories of heroic deeds performed by extraordinary men. Known as yarn spinners, these storytellers captured the spirit of their times in their wild tales, and that spirit was preserved in their stories. One of the most notable of these yarn spinners was African-American mountain man James Beckwourth.
- 2 Beckwourth's experiences provided the basic elements of his stories. To add interest, he embellished his stories with a heavy sprinkling of exaggerated claims. However, not many men in the 1800s could claim to have been a slave, an explorer, a trapper, and a Crow Nation war chief. Beckwourth's adventures took him from Florida to California, up the Mississippi River and across the Rocky Mountains.
- 3 James Beckwourth is believed to have been born in 1798, though records are inconclusive. His mother was an enslaved African woman and his father was her Irish-American master. Beckwourth was himself a slave until the 1820s, when his father arranged to free him legally. It was around this time that Beckwourth left the family home in search of adventure.
- 4 As a young man, James Beckwourth was gripped by restlessness. He eventually contracted with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to trap beaver throughout northern Colorado. Trappers lived solitary lives throughout trapping season. They came to town only to turn in their pelts, collect their pay, and purchase supplies for the next season's trapping. In an effort to bring these isolated people together, the fur company decided to convene a gathering for the mountain men at Henry's Fork of the Green River in 1825. The event drew mountain men, trappers, Native Americans, and anyone willing to swap goods and stories with the most rugged men of their time.
- 5 A few years later, Beckwourth experienced a dramatic change. In about 1828, Beckwourth was captured by a party of Crow warriors while on a trapping expedition with another mountain man, Jim Bridger. By Beckwourth's account, he was mistaken for the long-lost son of a tribal chieftain and adopted into the tribe. Beckwourth spent the next six to eight years with the Crow. He is believed to have gained considerable influence within the tribe, and numerous documents from his contemporaries corroborate his claims and confirm his position of leadership. Within the ranks of the Crow, Beckwourth rose to at least the level of War Chief. The tribe gave new names to its warriors for courageous acts of daring, and Beckwourth collected many Crow names, including Morning Star, Antelope, and Medicine Calf.



- 6 In the mid-1830s Beckwourth left the Crow and returned to a more staid, civilized life in Missouri. However, he found city life tedious. When Beckwourth heard of an opportunity to fight in the second Seminole War, he joined a Missouri contingent and headed to Florida. Beckwourth signed on as an express rider and muleteer¹ for a salary of fifty dollars per month. He soon, however, grew bored with the structured routine of the Florida military. As he would do many times in his life, James Beckwourth simply packed up his belongings and moved on to try something else as soon as he became restless and felt the need for a change.
- 7 When the California Gold Rush erupted in 1849, Beckwourth joined the throng of prospectors looking to make a quick fortune. Panning for gold was a laborious process, however, and it did not suit his restless nature. Instead, he discovered a pass and created a trail through the Sierra Nevada Mountains that eased wagon train travel over the last obstacle before reaching California. Beckwourth Trail became the preferred route to northern California, and Beckwourth opened a ranch and trading post to serve the travel-weary settlers. At his ranch, Beckwourth dictated his autobiography to Justice of the Peace Thomas Bonner. *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians* was published in 1856.
- 8 Among early frontiersmen of the American West, the ability to “spin a good yarn” was a skill that was highly valued, much like marksmanship or woodsmanship. While Beckwourth certainly had a tendency to inflate numbers or to occasionally make himself the hero of events that may have actually involved other people, many of the claims made in his autobiography have been verified by later historians. Operating a trading post enabled Beckwourth to spin his wild yarns to an ever-changing audience. Whenever wanderlust overwhelmed Beckwourth, he simply moved to another post, another city, another frontier. In 1866 Beckwourth returned to Colorado to live again with the Crow, where it is reported that he died under mysterious circumstances. Because of prejudice, Beckwourth’s role in American history was often dismissed by historians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the tales of James Pierson Beckwourth provide both an accurate and engaging account of what 19th-century life was like for a fur trapper, soldier, member of the Crow Nation, pioneer of the Southwest, California gold miner, and trading post operator in the American West.

¹muleteer - a driver of mules