

THADDEUS DUNKLEY 1843-?

According to historian James Armstead, Thaddeus Dunkley was a black cowboy who probably would've remained unknown if not for his daughter, an El Paso, Texas, teacher. Wanting to share her father's experiences on the great cattle drives in the late 1800s, she wrote his biography in the 1920s.

Dunkley was born as a slave in 1843 in Clarkston, Tenn., but gained freedom 20 years later when the Union Army marched south in 1863. His account includes swimming across the Mississippi River by clinging to his horse's tail then settling in the West.

"People didn't get a lot of beef before the Civil War. They ate pork and chicken," Armstead told high school students. "General Grant wanted to make sure his troops were going to be fed well, so all along the Mississippi River, considered the western front, they ate beef."

Dunkley went to work at Confederate Col. Charles Goodnight's K Bar Inn in West Texas, driving cattle from open range in Montana in the days when they had to be transported to railheads in Dodge City and Abilene, Kan. Dunkley recalled driving cattle only six to eight miles on a good day.

"There were about 40 of us that went north with the cattle drive in the spring," said Armstead, portraying Dunkley. "The North Star steer was the front of the pack, one that could be controlled, that would lead the rest," he recalled.

Most cowboys only worked five years and many only worked part time during the cattle drive, but Dunkley stayed with the ranch for 40 years, Armstead said. Some of the cowboy terms were derived from Spanish, like "remuda" horses and "chapaderos" or chaps, as Mexican cowboys helped show the Americans how to herd cattle, he said.

"You didn't make a lot of money, \$30 to \$35 per month, and you were provided your own gear," Armstead said.

As Dunkley, Armstead recalled spending a harsh winter in Southern Utah with the Ute Indians, a friendly tribe. The cattle drivers used to give some Indian tribes cattle as a toll for passage, he said.

"The cattle drives were over by 1890, and the reason for that was the railroad," Armstead, said. "Nobody was ever very far from a railhead. If a rancher was more than 100 miles from a railhead that was unusual."