On Negro History Week

Today marks the beginning of Negro History Week, and a number of local observances of this fact are being scheduled. The Negro has been a part of Louisiana history almost from the beginning, and there is a great deal that can be researched and put into textbooks concerning the Negro's contribution to our history, if and when properly equipped scholars set about the task.

The first two Negro slaves were imported in 1708 by Bienville, who bought them in the French West Indies. By 1712 there were some 20 slaves in the French colony of Louisiana, and an additional 20 were imported in 1713.

The importation of Negro slaves soon gained momentum. Antoine Crozat was given exclusive trade rights in the colony by the French crown, and in 1716 Crozat brought in about 500 Negroes from the French West Indies. Historians record, however, that slaves from the West Indies proved to be so troublesome that thereafter those brought into Louisiana were Africans. During Crozat's term as proprietor more than 6,000 Negro slaves were introduced into the colony, and almost all of the larger plantations and many of the smaller farms depended entirely upon slave labor. Because of such heavy reliance upon manpower, it is obvious that the cultivation of such large areas of rich land in Louisiana would not have been possible had the planters been forced to rely completely upon the labor of white men.

In fact, without the Negro slave the plantation system would never have been developed, and Louisiana would never have gained its pre-Civil War place among the richest states of the Union.

Only the Indian and a few hundred white men and women, therefore, preceded the Negro into Louisiana, and there is a great deal of historical material available for scholars who are interested in charting the course of the black race and its contributions to Louisiana's economic, political and social fortunes.

To date, however, not a great deal of real historical research has been carried on in this field. Few pre-college history texts mention the Negro, except in vaguely general terms. Of late, however, there have been a number of new books on Negro history.

Some of them represent good work, but many of them are the sort of "cotton candy" history best illustrated by the absurd tale of George Washington and the cherry tree.

Across the country, in colleges and high schools there have been demands by Negro students for the institution of black studies. Many schools and universities are beginning such courses. It is reminiscent of the frantic activity that took place in the schools and colleges after the flight of Sputnik I, when everybody wanted to study Russian.

Things eventually settled down in that field of study, and they will also settle down in the field of black studies.

Such courses can do a great deal of good, if they are properly conducted, and presented in the proper environment. The Negro has made real and solid contributions to Louisiana and to the nation, and Negro students ought to know about these, so that they can better evaluate themselves and their forebears.

We doubt, however, if courses in Swahili, or in the art of the Gold Coast, now being offered in some schools, are really relevant to the actual needs of students in Louisiana or elsewhere in the United States.

Negro students today need to know the contributions that their fellow Negroes have made in the fields of economics, politics and science in this country. They need to know that Negro troops have fought in every war that the United States has fought, from the American Revolution to today.

We doubt if it will be effective, however, for such material to be taught in separate, distinct courses. We think American history should be taught as a unit, and we think that all students, of all shades of pigmentation, should be made aware of the contributions of all minority groups.

The Negroes have made important contributions to our society, but so have the Acadians, the Jews, the Irish, the Germans, the Indians and the Spaniards. We do not think any of them should be slighted.

We think every student should be given a realistic understanding of the past and the present. Emphasis on key Negro figures in history needs to be given, along with the contributions made over the centuries by ordinary Negro citizens. But this should also be done for other minority groups.

Students of Italian, Syrian, Spanish, French and other ancestry should know about Crispus Attucks, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker Washington and George Washington Carver, just as Negro students should know about them.

But the Negro students should also know about the equally impressive contributions of other minorities. They need to know that while the Negroes were building the Southern plantation system, the Irish were building the Eastern cities, and the Chinese were building the Pacific Coast economy.

When viewed in its context as a part of the mainstream of American history, the Negro's contribution is just as impressive, if not more so, than when viewed in a vacuum.