

The Buffalo Soldier, an Icon in American History

During my research, I have come across several different notions of where the name **Buffalo Soldiers** originated. According to the Buffalo Soldier National Museum, the name started with the Cheyenne in a battle during the winter of 1877. The Cheyenne translation for Buffalo Soldier is "Wild Buffalo".

Wikipedia says that the name began with the Cheyenne in September of 1867, when a band of seventy Cheyenne warriors attacked a small hunting party. The warriors killed everyone in the hunting party except for one of the escorts. The Cheyenne shot the horse out from under Private John Randall (of the **10th Cavalry**). He was able to scramble away and found safety in a washout under the railroad tracks. With a pistol as his only weapon, Randall held off the warriors until help came. Leaving thirteen warriors dead, Randall suffered a gunshot wound to his shoulder and eleven lance wounds – and lived to tell the tale. Wikipedia states that the Cheyenne said this was a "new type of soldier who fought like a cornered buffalo." They said "like a buffalo, he had suffered wound after wound, and yet had not died." The Cheyenne compared his "thick and shaggy mane of hair" to that of a buffalo.

A few years later in 1871, writer Walter Hill said that the nickname started with the Comanche tribe who began calling the 10th Cavalry *Buffalo Soldiers* after experiencing their fierce fighting ability first hand.

Other interesting facts and stories about the Buffalo Soldiers:

From 1866-1980 Buffalo Soldiers held roles other than fighting battles. They were called in to protect citizens and ranchers, build roads and forts, escort the U.S. Mail delivery, and they also acted as the first Park Rangers for the National Park System.

The Johnson County War

1892, Wyoming. Ranchers who had already established themselves with large parcels of land and cattle businesses banded together and monopolized the geographic area so that newcomers who wanted to homestead or start ranches of their own were blocked by these large and powerful groups. Out of this unfair situation arose a dispute that evolved into **The Johnson County War** involving Johnson County, Natrona County, and Converse County in what was known as Powder River Country.

During that time cattle was big business and it was a serious offense to take someone else's cow or steer. Cattle roamed and grazed freely on "open ranges" and every year the ranchers would get together for round-ups. During round-ups they would separate their cattle by identifying which ranch they belonged to by their brands. Disputes would often arise when new calves or strays couldn't be tied to one ranch or another. The men who worked for these major ranching businesses were not allowed to own cattle themselves because their motives (or "property") might become questionable, and the bosses didn't want competition from their own employees. Someone suspected of "rustling" (stealing) cattle could be legally killed or lynched (hanged from a tree) with no questions asked. It was a common and unquestionable practice for those who were caught taking someone else's source of income and livelihood.

Cattle Rustling had become a major problem, so a group of fifty men were hired to hunt down and kill alleged cattle rustlers in Wyoming. This "expedition" included twenty-three gunmen from Paris, Texas, four Wyoming Cattle Detectives, an Idaho Frontiersman, some Wyoming Dignitaries, a Surgeon, and two reporters. They were referred to as the Regulators.

On Friday, April 8, 1892, there was a deadly shootout at the KC Ranch in an area now known as Kaycee, Wyoming. The group was after the owner of the small ranch, Nate Champion, who they perceived as "infringing" on their business by starting his ranch in their land area. The Regulators captured two men who had stayed there overnight as they were leaving the ranch the next morning, killed another in the doorway, and over the course of the day shot up Champion's house with him in it. During this day (that

must have seemed eternal to Champion), he actually took the time to write about what was going on in his journal. At nightfall, Champion ran out of his house through the back door with his gun and a knife in hand. There he was shot to death by four gunmen who were hiding in the dark. They pinned a note to his dead body that said "Cattle Rustlers Beware".

The shootout was witnessed by passing riders that day, who rode to Buffalo with another rancher and reported the violence. By Sunday, April 10, a sheriff's posse of 200 men was rounded up to offer protection to the remaining small ranchers in the area by arresting the Regulators.

The Regulator's next target was the T.A. Ranch on Crazy Woman Creek. The posse caught up to them there trapping them in a barn, and after two days of intense fighting a telegraph was sent to the attention of the President of the United States. President Benjamin Harrison called in the United States Cavalry to "break the conflict, end the violence, and capture the killers". Under the U.S Constitution, Article IV, Section 4, Clause 2, U.S. forces may be called upon for aid under the President's orders for "protection from invasion and domestic violence".

The **6th Cavalry** arrived at 6:45 on the morning of April 13, 1892. They arrived just in time to rescue the Regulators whom the posse had trapped in a barn. The posse had created gunpowder bombs and were about to blow up the Regulators when the Cavalry arrived and ended the shootout.

Because there wasn't room to hold so many prisoners at Fort McKinney, the prisoners were taken about 250 miles away to Laramie, Wyoming. The tensions in the Fort McKinney area were still high and it was worried that another outbreak of violence would occur under the social and political pressures there. The government brought in the **9th Cavalry** to relieve the **6th Cavalry**, who was reassigned to Suggs, Wyoming, where they were to keep the peace and build a fort called "Camp Bettens".

Park Rangers

Beginning in 1899, and continuing through 1904, African-American regiments served their summers in Sequoia and Yosemite National Parks. The National Parks Service wasn't formed until 1916, so these soldiers served as "**Park Rangers**" before the position was actually created.

During the Spanish and American War, Buffalo Soldiers began making a crease down the middle of their hats (a Montana Peak, or pinch) to deflect the heavy rains during tropical downpours. This "style" of hat used by the Buffalo Soldiers became recognized as the "Ranger Hat" as far back as 1899; and, eventually became known as the ***Smokey the Bear Hat***. This name and style of hat was officially 'adopted' by the army in 1911.

The Joan-of-Arc of African-American History

September, 1844, Independence, Missouri. One of my favorite stories is about **Cathay Williams**, a Joan-of-Arc in African-American History. Born to a free man and an indentured woman, and thus into slavery, Cathay was used as a house-girl until the death of her owner when she was 17. Cathay was taken out of slavery by soldiers and happily worked as a military cook and laundress until the end of the Civil War.

Not wanting to rely on, or become a burden to her relatives or friends Cathay Williams was determined to be independent and decided to join the U.S. Infantry as a soldier. She reversed her name and became William Cathay. Back then, there were no physical exams required for acceptance into the military so Cathay was able to keep her gender a secret for three years, with only a cousin and a close friend in her regiment knowing the truth about her.

Not long after joining, Cathay became sick with small pox and was hospitalized. From her weakened condition due to this disease and the elements of marching in extreme weather over the years, she was

hospitalized several more times during her three years of service. When a doctor finally realized she was a woman, she was discharged in 1868. Because of her growing physical disabilities and weakness, Williams contracted diabetes, had all her toes amputated, and walked with a crutch. Even with these extreme circumstances she was denied disability benefits in 1891 (see a copy of her discharge papers in the slideshow).

After her time in the service, Cathay Williams moved to Colorado where she worked as a cook, a seamstress, and it is thought that she possibly owned a boarding house. She was briefly married to a man who later stole all her money and a team of horses; she had him arrested. Cathay's life and military service became known publicly, and a narrative was published in *The St. Louis Daily Times* on 2 January 1876. It is believed that Cathay Williams died sometime in 1892 and was buried in an unknown location with a wooden marker that has, by now, deteriorated.

Today the term **Buffalo Soldiers** has become a generic term for all African-American soldiers. U.S. Army units trace their lineage back to the 9th and 10th Cavalries who have "earned an honored place in U.S. history". These stories sound like the kind of legends we've all heard about and watched in the movies; like the famous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys of West Virginia. This article offers only a few of the many stories that contributed to our country's early heritage, making this era of time known as the Wild West.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buffalo_Soldier

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnson_County_War

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cathay_Williams

www.blackpast.org

www.buffalosoldier.net

http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/learning/community_outreach_programs/buffalo_soldiers/