



## Serving With Distinction: Buffalo Soldiers at Fort Larned



Although African Americans had served in the U.S. Army from the Revolutionary War through the Civil War, it was always in volunteer units that weren't part of the regular army. Beginning in 1866, Congress authorized separate, regular army units for African Americans. These troops eventually became known as "Buffalo Soldiers."

### What's in a name?



### 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry

used when these new units were sent out to the field were "colored" or "brunettes."

In 1911, the 10th Cavalry adopted the buffalo as a central element in their unit crest. This now famous nickname for these new African American regular army units wasn't used in the early years of their service. Leaving out racial slurs regularly used at the time, the most common terms

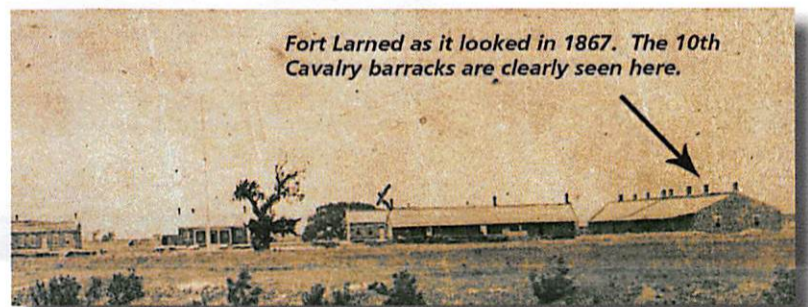
The origin and intent of the name isn't clear, although we do know that either the Comanche or the Cheyenne first used the term around 1870. Although some accounts credit their reason as the bison-like tenacity these men showed in combat, there is no evidence to support that claim. Their most likely reason was the similarity between the curly hair of the soldiers and that of the buffalo.

Starting in 1873, the term begins to show up in the writing of officers and their wives, as well as in newspaper articles; however, there is very little written evidence that the men used it to refer to themselves.

### Professional Soldiers

All the units that would eventually earn the name of Buffalo Soldiers, were authorized by Congress in 1866 as part of a downsizing and restructuring of the Army after the Civil War. The bill authorized the creation of four new Cavalry regiments, two of which were to be, in the words of the authorizing legislation, "composed of colored men." Along with the two cavalry units, the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry, "colored" infantry regiments were created as well, the 24th and 25th U.S. Infantry.

These new units, initially commanded by white officers, represented the first professional African American soldiers in the country's peacetime army. Recruitment of the officers and men, as well as organizing and training the



Fort Larned as it looked in 1867. The 10th Cavalry barracks are clearly seen here.

new soldiers took up to a year, so they weren't sent west for frontier duty until 1867. These men quickly proved themselves to be a capable and courageous addition to the country's frontier military force, despite the common belief of many people of the day that they wouldn't make good soldiers.

Though they couldn't have known it at the time, Congress' authorization of those "colored" units led to the creation of a legendary American fighting unit: the Buffalo Soldiers.



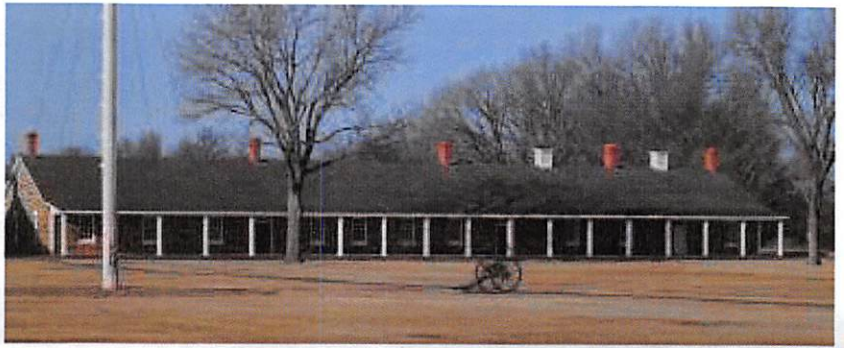
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## Company A at Fort Larned

Company A of the 10th U.S. Cavalry was one of the first of these new units sent west for frontier duty. The unit was stationed at Fort Larned from April 30, 1867 to early January 1869. The men came mostly from Missouri, Kansas, and a small number of northeastern cities. While stationed at Fort Larned members of Co. A participated in the normal routine of a frontier post. This included work details and guard duty, as well as grooming their horses and practicing cavalry drills.

The troopers went on constant patrols, and fought against Indians twice in 1868. In the first encounter, they assisted Fort Dodge by pursuing "...a large party of Indians from

that post fifteen miles to Mulberry Creek, killing three." In December of that same year, Indians attacked a supply train bound for



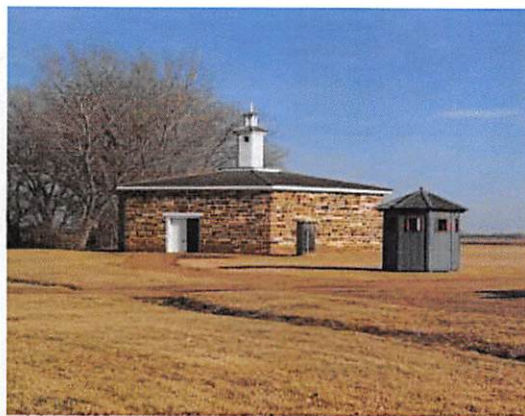
*With 96 men, Company A was one of the few companies at Fort Larned close to the full 100 men regulation strength. Their quarters were in this original barracks building at the fort. As with all the enlisted men at the fort, they slept in the squad room with two men to a bunk and ate their meals in the company mess hall.*

Fort Dodge at Little Cow Creek and drove off the cattle. Twenty troopers from Co. A rode 14 miles to Little Cow Creek, recaptured the cattle and escorted the train to safety. Thirteen men suffered frostbite in this action due to the severe winter weather at the time.

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## Racism on the Frontier

Life in the frontier army was lonely and difficult for all soldiers but these men had an added hardship—the racism common during that time. At Fort Larned this racism would eventually lead to the 10th Cavalry's transfer from the post.



*The Blockhouse at Fort Larned, which was used as the post Guard House. Members of Co. A would have taken their turn at guard duty here just like the other companies on the post.*

On January 1, 1869, there was a disagreement in the Sutler's store between two men of Co. A and three men of the white Infantry company stationed at the post. Although the post commander, Major Yard, didn't have all the facts about what happened, he apparently blamed the men from Co. A because he sent the entire company to guard the post wood pile that night during a blizzard.

On the following morning around 7:00 a.m., the fort's Cavalry's stables caught fire and burned, killing 39 horses and destroying the grain and ammunition stored there. The fire's cause was never determined for sure. Major Yard initially decided not to investigate and sent the 10th to Fort Zarah to avoid further trouble. Although the Military Division headquarters quickly ordered an investigation, the Court of Inquiry decided that the men of Company A were at fault even though they were not present at the stables that morning. That verdict was later overturned.

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## A Proud Tradition

For more than 25 years both the 9th and 10th U.S. Cavalry, along with the 24th and 25th U.S. Infantry Regiments served in some of the roughest areas of the American frontier. Whether it was the blistering desert of the Texas Big Bend region in summer, or the sub-zero temperatures of the Dakotas in winter, these brave soldiers kept settlers safe from Indians, cattle thieves and outlaws.

Most of their efforts are not remembered or appreciated, and racism often prompted the very locals they were protecting to harass them. The white settlers in these areas were not used to black men in blue uniforms and were slow to value the protection of their

property, lives and prosperity the Buffalo Soldiers so valiantly provided.

After the close of the frontier, the Buffalo Soldiers went on to participate in the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War, World Wars I & II, as well as the Korean War. After President Truman desegregated the Army during the Korean War, the remaining Buffalo Soldier units were disbanded and their soldiers integrated into the regular Army.

All the men who served in the Buffalo Soldier units are part of a proud military tradition, one that reflected devotion to duty and service with distinction. An honorable tradition by anyone's standards.