

Invisible Men: *Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada*  
By Shelton Johnson

*The officers and enlisted men have cheerfully endured many hardships and privations, and in the midst of great dangers steadfastly maintained a most gallant and zealous devotion to duty, and they may well be proud of the record made, and rest assured that the hard work undergone in the accomplishment of such important and valuable service to their country...cannot fail, sooner or later, to meet with due recognition and reward.*  
Benjamin H. Grierson, Col. 10<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry

From 1891 to 1914, Yosemite, Sequoia & General Grant (Kings Canyon) National Parks were under the protection of the U.S. Army.

The National Park Service did not exist when these parks were created and would not for another 25 years. Consequently, although the parks were set aside because Congress recognized their intrinsic value, those values were not universally held. *National parks* were still a new concept, and fluency with this upstart language that expressed a different relationship with the land was slow in coming.

These parks were under the direction of the *Department of Interior*, which had limited resources at its disposal to protect these new values held in trust by the federal government. The branch of government that had the most experience with this kind of challenge was the *War Department*.

Thousands of soldiers had been used after the Civil War to protect the wagon trains of settlers. They had served as the only true police force on the western frontier. They had, in short, ample experience with all the day to day demands of maintaining law and order in an often lawless and chaotic wilderness.

Obviously, this was a perfect match. Patrolling the Sierra's rugged country, mapmaking, enforcing rules and regulations, maintaining the peace, overseeing the construction of trails and other infrastructure, these were familiar tasks to the officers and enlisted men of the U.S.

Army. It was also an experience that was markedly different from earlier service in Cuba and the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Duty in *the Range of Light*, though challenging, had its own rewards as evident in the following passage.

*It is the cavalryman's paradise. Food and drink for his horse everywhere. Though the cold of spring and autumn may be biting, though the life may be lonely, though the work may be difficult - still, happy is the soldier whose lines fall amid these scenes of grandeur and sublimity, where nature has put forth her mightiest efforts.*

Lt. N. F. McClure, 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, "Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association," 1897

One historian has even argued that the U.S. Cavalry "saved Yosemite National Park" by stepping in when that park needed protection most.

*In a very real sense, the protective presence of the United States Cavalry at a critical time in Yosemite's history kept the Park's high country from being permanently scarred, disfigured, or destroyed.*

Hank Johnston, pp. 55-6, Yosemite's Yesterday, Volume II, Flying Spur Press, Yosemite CA, 1991

*Now*, national parks constitute a global presence. Practically every nation on earth has nature reserves of one kind or another, but during the years that cavalry and infantry troops patrolled the Sierra Nevada, the *notion of national parks* was still revolutionary. Most people in the areas surrounding the new parks were not fluent with the cultural precepts that formed the foundation of the national park idea.

*Manifest destiny* was still the operative philosophy. Trees were simply timbers good for cabins, houses, or firewood. Wild animals were hunted for food, or killed outright. Natural objects were valued more for their utility than any aesthetic attributes. Park boundaries, rules, and regulations were routinely ignored. Obviously, under such a scenario, in the absence of resource *protection*, resource *degradation* would be sure to follow.

So, for nearly 25 years, U.S. Army soldiers *policed* not only the fledgling wilderness parks of the Sierra, but also Yellowstone National Park, resulting in a unique convergence of military and conservation history. No where else in the national park system is there a story quite like the one that can be found in the Rocky Mountains, and the Sierra Nevada. In the two premier mountain ranges in the contiguous United States, soldiers didn't merely *patrol* territories that would one day become national parks, these forgotten soldiers actually helped *preserve* the three oldest national parks in America. *Resource managers* before the term was coined, they formed a solid foundation for future park management.

*This year, I am happy to say, nearly every trace of the sad sheep years of repression and destruction have vanished. Blessings on Uncle Sam's blue-coats! The quiet, orderly soldiers have done this fine job, without any apparent friction or weak noise, in the still, calm way that the United States troops do their duty.*

John Muir, 1895

Thus, some of the first *park rangers*, were troops of the U.S. Army. This is a fact that is usually overshadowed by the eventual presence of the National Park Service. A fact that is even more obscure is the history that lies *within* that history. It is also a history that Yosemite and Sequoia do not share with Yellowstone making it unique to the High Sierra.

In 1899, the 24<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Infantry patrolled the rugged backcountry of Yosemite, Sequoia & General Grant National Parks. The 9th Regiment of Cavalry followed them in 1903 and 1904.

For those not familiar with U.S. military history, the numbers are meaningless, but the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry and 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry are better known as *buffalo soldiers*. These were African-American *infantry* and *cavalry* regiments formed in 1866 after the Civil War. In their infancy their primary purpose was to fight Indians on the western frontier, and it was from their engagements with cultures like the Sioux, Cheyenne,

and Apache that the unofficial sobriquet of buffalo soldier was bestowed upon them.

Many of these men were from the Deep South, and a military career offered both a social and economic reward that could rarely be found in civilian life below the Mason Dixon line. It also presented an opportunity to prove they were worthy of the full citizenship granted by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. They were excellent soldiers in a time when many felt they were incapable of performing *any* kind of military service.

*In the eyes of the world the Negro shall grow in the full height of manhood and stand out in the field of battle as a soldier clothed with all the inalienable rights of citizenship.*  
Illinois Record, 1898

Although their story has been celebrated for years, and there are histories, novels, and a few films that address their lives, the history of the *Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada* has only recently been illuminated by the light of day.

When one examines published histories of Yosemite for example, one would be hard put to find more than a handful of references to either the Ninth Cavalry or Twenty-fourth Infantry. These soldiers lie on the edges of an obscure chapter in a forgotten book. They are not, I believe, the victims of overt racism, but rather casualties of a greater society that simply doesn't see them. They are invisible men.

*I have thrived upon that which others have overlooked or regarded as unimportant scraps. There have been no minor matters to me.*  
Carl Parcher Russell, p. ix, Introduction, One Hundred Years in Yosemite, Omnibus Edition, 1992, Yosemite Association

The above statement is significant in that it expresses the perspective of a true historian, someone who delves deep and long in an attempt to capture the fleeting moment, or happenstance, as much as the events that jealously hold the spot light, both in our imagination and

in our books. Even so, every historian not only has a point of view, but also a point to make.

Yosemite's period of military administration lasted from 1891 to 1914, and that history within a history is briefly discussed by Mr. Russell from page 155 to 159. This is not a criticism. Carl Russell's study presents the sweep of all the forces that shaped Yosemite, it traces the evolution of a new idea, how the management of wild lands also evolved over time. The subject *is* Yosemite. How *Yosemite* came to be, and how it changed over time. The focus is not *buffalo soldiers*, and whatever is not the focus is usually out of focus.

Simply put, the *focus* of Russell's study does not allow for the *visibility* of the park's African-American soldiers. They are subsumed by the larger imperative of telling the military story within the context of the "greater" story of park stewardship. Neither the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry, nor the 9<sup>th</sup> cavalry is ever mentioned by name. Even when Russell notes the names of Acting Military Superintendents for 1899, 1903, and 1904, he does not tell us the regiments for those years.

Again, why should he? That's not the story he's trying to tell, so he doesn't tell it. Yet even though the omission reflects more the demands of storytelling rather than any hostility to *this* story, the natural consequence for the soldiers is *invisibility*. Moreover, even if Mr. Russell had given us the regiments, only those readers conversant with buffalo soldier history would recognize that "24<sup>th</sup> Infantry" or "9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry" refer to African-American military units.

The pattern continues. In his chronology of Yosemite events, Mr. Russell fails to mention that Lt. W. H. McMasters also served in Yosemite in 1899 as Acting Military Superintendent. McMasters commanded a detachment of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry. They were only present in the Sierra for a few short weeks, but they were present. Even if they had only been present for a few hours that still would be a figure greater than zero.

Historians must decide what to omit and what to include, what to spotlight and what to leave in the background. They zoom in for close ups of a particular person or event, then zoom back out to get a sense of the larger picture, and all is in motion; facts, analogies, comparisons drifting along like people on a pilgrimage knowing where the journey began, where they are each step of the way, and the ultimate goal. Meanwhile all this *material* has to be tied to some central organic theme tying it all together.

It's easy to see how a handful of soldiers could disappear with so much going on, but it's harder to grasp the forced absence of nearly 500 men over a period of 3 years. *It's all a matter of focus.* No one until relatively recently chose to focus on this particular story. Once that shift in perspective was accomplished, a new world swung into view, a world inhabited by people who had always been there, waiting on the fringes of someone else's story.

What this paper seeks to argue, is that invisibility is as much a *process* as it is a *product*. People don't just fall out of stories as if they were the unfortunate victims of an accident. The holes in the foundations of history are there by design. What is not so obvious is the intent of the designer. Histories are *habitats* too, just like cities and towns, hotels and shops. All can be engineered such that as *environments* they are hostile places for women and people of color.

Every year millions are pushed out of stories softly, nudged here and there as if by a wind, until one day they stand on the turbulent threshold of history, and in an instant they are gone, gone in a way that only the forgotten disappear. They call to us from outside the frames of *photographs*, *newsreels*, beyond the margins of *letters* and *reports*, external to the warm, illuminated spaces within *books*, their voices forever silent.

An invisible history may be a by-product of a charged atmosphere, much in the same way that lightning similarly results from an electrical tension between earth and sky. A thunderstorm fuels a

restoration of equilibrium that pulls lightning down from sky, but from this charged atmosphere only darkness falls. That gloom could lead any historian to say:

*I have thrived upon that which others have overlooked or regarded as unimportant scraps. There have been no minor matters to me.*

Carl Parcher Russell

Yet all matters are major or minor depending on one's point of view. Viewed from the great Central Valley, the Sierra Nevada is not an imposing sight, it is simply there where earth and sky meet. Only once you begin to walk up into the foothills, and continue into that high country does the magnitude of the journey impress itself upon you. It is the same with this history.

While some have seen mounds or hills off in the distance, I beheld the *Range of Light* holding the blue of a daunted sky. Yosemite was in that far off haze, and Sequoia, but in what shadow was the shadow of Charles Young, West Point graduate, buffalo soldier, military superintendent, diplomat, linguist, musician, composer, and poet?

*A journey through this park and the Sierra Forest Reserve to the Mount Whitney country will convince even the least thoughtful man of the needfulness of preserving these mountains just as they are, with their clothing of trees, shrubs, rocks, and vines, and of their importance to the valley's below as reservoirs for storage of water for agricultural and domestic purposes. In this, then, lies the necessity of forest preservation*

Capt. Charles Young, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Sequoia National Park, 1903

If this man, the second recipient of the NAACP's prestigious *Spingarn Medal* in 1916, and a great source of pride for African-Americans of the time, could be dismissed from our collective memory then what of the men of his command? *Missing in action* from Carl Russell's One Hundred Years in Yosemite, they do appear briefly in Harvey Meyerson's excellent Nature's Army, When Soldiers Fought for Yosemite.

In the epilogue of that work, Meyerson describes how Major John Bigelow, Jr. of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry successfully kept at bay the desires of Sierra Forest manager Charles Shinn who coveted Yosemite and wanted it placed under the control of the forest reserve (p. 234, Nature's Army..., Harvey Meyerson, University Press of Kansas, 2001), which had it succeeded would have eventually placed Yosemite under the *care* of Gifford Pinchot's U.S. Forest Service.

*...Bigelow held him in check through astute management and the fine field work of troopers he had officered during two previous decades of frontier service--Troops K and L of the Ninth Cavalry, one of the army's two black regiments (who had white officers in those days), the famous "Buffalo Soldiers."*

P. 235, Nature's Army, When Soldiers Fought for Yosemite, by Harvey Meyerson, University of Kansas Press, 2001

Meyerson goes on to state how in 1904, under Bigelow's direction, Ninth Cavalry soldiers constructed "*the first arboretum and botanical garden in a national park*" (ibid., p. 237)

*He conceived and constructed this remarkable seventy-five acre facility in his spare time during the brief summer allotted to him, drawing on his frontier experience and hurried correspondence with horticulturalists on the East Coast. His arboretum had "the first marked nature trail in the national park system," with log seats and neatly painted signposts identifying plants by their Latin species names. Bigelow told the interior secretary that he hoped his pioneering facility would serve as the foundation for a full-scale Yosemite "nature museum" and education program such as would in fact eventually be undertaken by the National Park Service nationwide.*

(ibid., p. 237)

So, according to Meyerson, "the first marked nature trail in the national park system" was built in Yosemite in 1904 by the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. That arboretum has been forgotten in the ensuing years, just like the men who built it, but their impact on Yosemite was real. The land remembers though the people may not.

Meyerson's notation is the first real acknowledgement by an historian that this history *is* history. But once again, his focus like Carl Russell,

is different. To find this story one must concentrate on *primary documents*, and it is there that the story comes to life.

For instance, some stories exist solely in the oral tradition. I've wondered about the kind of interactions that took place between these African-American soldiers on patrol, and the Indians in the region. Gaylen Lee in his Memoirs of a Mono Indian Family relates such an encounter. At this point it is the only other account of *buffalo soldiers* in the Sierra that I've found in print.

*One of Grandpa's childhood memories was seeing suntati, meaning "uniformed soldiers," who, he said, were tuma'asi, meaning "men with black skins." They were riding horses in the forest. That's all he knew about them.*

*The tuma'asi were "colored troopers" from the U.S. Army's 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, who were stationed at Yosemite National Park from 1899 to 1903. They were but one troop of many acting as an expeditionary force from 1891 until 1909, with orders to rid the park of herds of sheep that were supposedly damaging the federally protected forests and grasses. The soldiers Grandpa saw were outside the park's boundaries, occasionally they did leave the park to scour the Sierra National Forest.*

--from Memoirs of a Mono Indian Family, by Gaylen Lee, pp. 122-123, University of OK Press, 1998

There are several things of interest regarding this passage. One is that "24<sup>th</sup> Infantry" and "9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry" are yoked together in the same sentence although they constitute separate entities. There is also an implication that all of the soldiers who served in Yosemite from 1899 to 1903 were either 24<sup>th</sup> infantry or 9<sup>th</sup> cavalry, but in reality the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry, which was also the only infantry regiment to serve in the Sierra, arrived in the spring of 1899, while the 9<sup>th</sup> cavalry served in 1903 *and* 1904. In the intervening years, other regiments of cavalry (and one artillery regiment!) protected the Sierra. Also, this was a joint responsibility in the sense that usually in any given year the same military unit was present in *both* parks.

The above statement is not criticism but clarification. I have found that since I've begun my living history presentations about the Sierra's *buffalo soldiers*, it's entirely possible that people can walk away with the impression that *all* of the soldiers in the Sierra were African-American, which is not true. I have to specifically state that *only about 10% were buffalo soldiers* in order to avoid creating this misperception.

The point here is that when you spotlight anything it takes on a greater value and sadly the reverse is also true. What is cast into the margins of history is often cast into oblivion. That's why it's so important that assumptions are tested to see if they're valid.

With such a critical eye we can now turn to the annual *Superintendent Reports* which were written by the *Commanding Officer* of each unit assigned to national park duty. That officer, usually a captain, but sometimes of greater or lesser rank, would at season's end compose a report chronicling the challenges of the preceding year.

During the 1899 season there were actually 3 *Acting Military Superintendents* in Yosemite, but apparently only one in Sequoia & General Grant National Parks. Normally there would be only one in each park per summer season. This was probably due to constraints created by the Spanish-American War. Two of those Yosemite superintendents; Capt. E. F. Wilcox of the 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. William Forse of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Artillery, are remembered through their joint reports. The third Acting Yosemite Superintendent, and first of the season, was Lt. W. H. McMasters of the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Apparently there wasn't a report of his to be found by the time Capt. Wilcox took over the reins later that season. Although Wilcox states his name as "Lieut. W. H. McMasters" the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry officer's real name is 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. George Hunter McMaster. (*p. 677, Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register & Dictionary of the U.S. Army 1789-1903, Vol. 1, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1903*) I mention this as an example of how this history, indeed all histories can be clouded by little mistakes carried down through the years.

In Wilcox's nearly 4 page *Superintendent's Report* the only mention of the Twenty-fourth Infantry's presence in Yosemite reads as follows:

*From records in this office I find that the park was under the control of Lieut. W. H. McMasters, Twenty-fourth Regiment of Infantry, with a detachment of 25 men of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, he being relieved June 21, 1899, by Lieut. William Forse, Third Artillery, with a similar detachment of that regiment.*

So, the history of the Twenty-fourth Infantry in Yosemite is "reduced" to a part of a sentence primarily because the person writing the report is a cavalry officer from a different regiment. Lt. Forse's report fails to even mention the presence of the Twenty-fourth Infantry even though the Third Artillery was the regiment which succeeded the Twenty-fourth Infantry in its stewardship role. Thus the history related to us through this document is also second hand information.

When one turns to the *Superintendent Report* for the same year (1899) in Sequoia & General Grant National Parks one finds an entry not dissimilar from the one in Yosemite even though it was written by another officer, Second Lieutenant Henry B. Clark, Third Artillery, Acting Superintendent.

*Pursuant to Special Order, No. 123, Headquarters Department of California, a detachment of Battery D, Third Artillery, was detailed to relieve the detachment of Twenty-fourth Infantry and perform the duty of guarding the Sequoia and General Grant National Parks.*

Once again, in one sentence we have an implied history. Second Lieutenant Clark doesn't even see the need to mention the name of the officer who was in command of the Twenty-fourth Infantry detachment. This history through the language of its chroniclers becomes *detached* as well.

If the above were the only official record of the presence of "Colored" soldiers, it would be easy to see how the memory of these men could so readily vanish. Yet, it is not the only record, other *Superintendent Reports* for the years 1903 and 1904 when the Ninth

Cavalry assumed command of the parks, stand in marked contrast to 1899 in terms of a recorded presence, and yet even their memory eventually faded nearly as completely as the Twenty-fourth Infantry.

*Pursuant to General Orders, No. 15, dated Headquarters Department of California, San Francisco, Cal., April 21, 1903, Troops K and L, Ninth Cavalry (4 officers and 103 enlisted men), left the Presidio of San Francisco, April 25, 1903, and marched to the park, arriving May 7, 1903. The distance—279 miles—was covered in thirteen days. The command immediately established a camp on the site the troops on duty in the park have heretofore occupied, 1 mile west of Wawona. I arrived and assumed the duties of acting superintendent, May 14, 1903.*

—From the "Report of the Acting Superintendent of Yosemite National Park in California to the Secretary of the Interior, 1903" by Lieutenant-Colonel Jos. Garrard, Fourteenth Cavalry, Acting Superintendent.

*Sir: I have the honor to forward herewith the report of Capt. Charles Young, Ninth U.S. Cavalry, acting superintendent of the Sequoia and General Grant National Parks.... An examination of the work done on the roads and trails under the direction of Capt. Charles Young shows that it has been well done, and the quantity is largely in excess of that done in previous years with the same amount of money. This I consider largely due to the strict personal supervision of the work given by Captain Young, who continually spurred on the men under his employ, with the idea that the road to the Giant Forest must be completed this year.*

—From the "Report of the Acting Superintendent of Sequoia & General Grant National Parks in the State of California to the Secretary of the Interior, 1903" by Captain L. W. Cornish, Ninth U.S. Cavalry, Acting Superintendent.

*Sir: I have the honor to submit the following report of the conditions obtaining and of the management of affairs in Sequoia and General Grant National Parks for that part of the year 1903 (from May 20 to October 15) during which I was acting superintendent of these parks.*

*Pursuant to General Orders, No. 15, Headquarters Department of California, dated San Francisco, Cal., April 21, 1903, I marched with Troops I and M, Ninth Cavalry (3 officers and 93 enlisted men), on May 20 from San Francisco, arriving at Kaweah, Cal, June 3. A general supply camp was established and maintained here throughout the year, as it is centrally located with respect to the posts to be furnished....As soon as we arrived at Kaweah immediate steps were taken to secure the park from injury and depredations by sending*

*detachments to Cedar Creek on the Old Colony Mill Road, to Cold Spring on the Mineral King Road, to Cloughs Cave on the South Fork of the Kaweah River, and to General Grant Park.*

—From "The Report of the Acting Superintendent of Sequoia & General Grant National Parks in the State of California to the Secretary of the Interior, 1903" by Captain Charles Young, Acting Military Superintendent.

Thus began the Ninth Cavalry's stewardship of Yosemite, Sequoia & General Grant National Parks, which continued the following year in 1904 with four other Ninth Cavalry troops. By the fall of 1904, fully eight troops of the Ninth Cavalry served in these mountain parks. Even with a conservative estimate of 50 men per troop, we still get a total of over 400 buffalo soldiers.

The *Superintendent Reports* present a general picture in each year of the accomplishments, challenges, and frustrations that faced the soldiers. Some of these reports have subheadings such as *Private Lands, Roads and Trails, Game, Violations of Park Regulations, Hunting and Trespassing, Permits, Forest Fires*, which give a sense of a few of the issues effecting these lands.

It was apparent to me upon perusal of these reports that there were other stories hidden beneath the formal tone of the documents. For instance:

*All persons entering the park were required to give up their firearms, or, when they desired to leave the reservation by another road, the arms were sealed and delivered to the owners with a permit to carry the sealed weapons through the park. During the season the firearms taken up at this camp were as follows: Rifles, 47; shotguns, 36; revolvers, 15; total, 98. These have been returned to owners at their expense, when claimed, on or after departure from the park.*

—p. 4, "Report of the Acting Superintendent of the Yosemite National Park..., 1903" Lt.-Col. Jos. Garrard, Fourteenth Cavalry, Acting Superintendent

Well, the above sounds like a simple enough procedure until you visualize the scene. Imagine a group of four or five "Colored"

soldiers in 1903 requesting a Euro-American visitor to relinquish their weapons to them, keeping in mind that this was an era of widespread violence toward African-Americans. Even though the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution had ended Slavery, brought full citizenship, and the right to vote, from the point of view of many African-Americans those rights existed on paper but not in reality. As W. E. B. DuBois, pioneering sociologist, confidant and colleague of Charles Young, put it in 1903:

*...for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.*  
(p. xi, The Forethought, The Souls of Black Folk, by W.E.B. Dubois, 1903, New American Library, 1969)

And certainly the mostly Euro-American *and* affluent visitors to Yosemite, Sequoia & General Grant National Parks would have been very mindful of the *skin color* of these soldiers. There was also a corresponding *social status* accompanying that *mark* that in the antebellum south would have been about the same as domestic livestock. Imagine *that* in contrast to the *authority* inherent in uniforms and *their* symbolic power. It should be obvious from this that the park experience of these soldiers was probably markedly different from their Euro-American *peers*.

A great philosophical debate was being waged among the African-American intelligentsia of the time. There were those who favored the more moderate goals of Booker T. Washington, but there were others who definitely felt that he did not go far enough and was too conciliatory to the dominant culture.

*...there is among educated and thoughtful colored men in all parts of the land a feeling of deep regret, sorrow, and apprehension at the wide currency and ascendancy which some of Mr. Washington's theories have gained.*  
(Ibid., pg. 82)

DuBois goes on to say more forcefully:

*Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things—*

*First, political power,  
Second, insistence on civil rights,  
Third, higher education of Negro youth,—  
and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, and accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South.*

DuBois continues as to how Mr. Washington ...*faces the triple paradox of his career:*

- 1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans businessmen and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.*
- 2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.*
- 3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates.*

(Ibid. pp. 87-88)

The above argument is crucial to this buffalo soldier history for several reasons.

- 1. This now historic debate was a contemporary issue for the Ninth Cavalry soldiers who served in the Sierra.*
- 2. Captain Charles Young, Acting Superintendent of Sequoia & General Grant National Parks in 1903, was part of this debate.*

In December of 1903, Captain Charles Young was asked by Stanford University to speak at Assembly Hall. Capt. Young spoke to the faculty and students about "a few of the standards and ideals of *new negrodom*," and continued in this vein:

*With all that is claimed for industrialism and with due honor to Mr. Booker T. Washington, I feel that what is proposed for the negro in that direction will not do the work. When the black man has learned the industrial trades and seeks work he runs into the*

*unions, where he is told that no negroes need apply. The white employer would employ him but is afraid. He knows the negro is entitled to work but he cannot give it to him.*

*We are urged to give up our claims to higher education. Tuskegee could not exist without higher education. Contact with men of brain, of high ideals is essential...History tells us of no race that has given up its best and highest ideals that has amounted to anything. When we are told to give up our highest ideals, our hearts tell us not to do it...We are not going to do it. And this is not the 'sassy nigger' that says this. It is the revolt of black American manhood. All we ask is that the educated men and women of our universities be kind and magnanimous toward the negro...All a negro asks is a white man's chance. Will you give it? Will you give the negroes a chance to build homes for themselves and a chance to make themselves good citizens?*

—from "The Daily Palo Alto," Vol. XXIII, Stanford University, Cal.,  
Wednesday, Dec. 9, 1903, No. 74

The above passage is remarkable for many reasons. Firstly, it illustrates the *relative prominence* of Capt. Charles Young. It would have been unusual in those days to have *any* African-American speak at Stanford University let alone a soldier. Charles Young was exceptional.

*He was the first black to graduate from the white high school in Ripley, Ohio, and through competitive examination he won an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1884. He went on to graduate with his commission, only the third black man to do so. Later he would remark that the worst he could wish for an enemy would be to make him a black man and send him to West Point.*

*Although Colonel Charles Young only served one season as Acting Superintendent of Sequoia National Park, he has not been forgotten. The energy and dignity he brought to his national park assignment left a strong imprint. His roads, much improved in later times, are still in use today, having served millions of park visitors for more than eighty years. And the example he set—a determined black man overcoming the prejudices of society—remains an inspiration to anyone who faces life's challenges head-on.*

—from "Black Army Captain in Charge During Sequoia National Park's Early Years" by Chief Naturalist William C. Tweed, a pamphlet published by Sequoia National Park.

Secondly, it does convey a sense of what daily life might have been like for those who had the *ambition* of a Charles Young but little else to recommend them. If there is one individual in this history who is the most *damaged* by the *amnesia* which afflicts this story, it would be Charles Young. In spite of formidable obstacles, he spoke several languages fluently, was an expert mapmaker, served as a U.S. diplomat, composed music for violin and piano, wrote plays, taught military science, French, mathematics, and directed the college band of *Wilberforce University* in Ohio prior to his involvement in the Spanish-American War. What could he have achieved if he had encountered support instead of opposition?

*Young's closest friend on the Wilberforce faculty was a young sociology professor, W.E.B. DuBois. The latter spent many an evening visiting with Young and his widowed mother, who kept house for Young. According to DuBois's biographer, Young "was the first genuine male friendship" in his life and "one of a handful in which there was genuine affinity." The friendship would endure until DuBois delivered the eulogy at Young's memorial service in 1923.*

—pg. 305, Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867-1898, Black & White Together, by Charles L. Kenner, University of Oklahoma Press

Certainly Charles Young would not be comfortable following the path set by Booker T. Washington. Young was a confident military officer, for whom any concession was synonymous with defeat. He was a man for whom valor was not an empty word. This is evident in his speech at Stanford. He is without a doubt the most prominent of all the Ninth Cavalry *buffalo soldiers* who served in Yosemite and Sequoia, and at the time of his death he was the most respected, and highest ranking, African-American in the U.S. military.

*After a memorial service in New York City in which Franklin D. Roosevelt was among the speakers, the body arrived in Washington on 1 June. Local blacks "made the...funeral one of a demonstration in respect to his memory." Every African American school from Howard University down to the elementary level was closed, and "thousands gathered" to pay homage as the funeral procession of regulars, veterans, and cadets marched down Pennsylvania Avenue and across the Potomac to Arlington. The final rites were observed in the Memorial Amphitheater. Fittingly, the last previous service there had been for the Unknown Soldier. Unlike the buffalo soldiers buried in segregated sections on Arlington's fringes, Young's body*

*rested among admirals and generals on the crest of a rolling ridge a short distance to the south of the Monument to the Unknown Soldier."*

(Ibid., pg. 306)

Even though Young fought tirelessly against the constraints of nineteenth century racial attitudes, what could have been his greatest professional triumph was denied. He was declared unfit for duty just as the country was on the brink of entry into World War I.

*...he sought to demonstrate his soundness by riding horseback from Ohio to Washington, where he presented an appearance 'astonishingly better than his medical examination indicates,' he was forced into retirement. Being denied the opportunity to train and lead a division of black soldiers into battle was undoubtedly the greatest disappointment of his life. He may have had high blood pressure, but the army leaders were also relieved to rid themselves of a man whose every action demonstrated the falseness of their racist beliefs.*  
(Ibid., p. 306)

Obviously, all Americans should remember such a man, but he, like his comrades, drifted into history's margins, yet there in those shadows he's an abrupt fierce light, like sunrise after a four hundred-year night.

*From his soldiers he demanded and received much. His troop was as well drilled and disciplined as any in the army. An army inspector, after observing it going through its drills at Sequoia National Park, stated that it was "without doubt the best instructed of any of the...troops on duty in the parks" and commended Young highly for "keeping it up to proper standard of instruction while attending to his many duties as park superintendent."*  
(Ibid. p. 308)

I make a point of highlighting Capt. Charles Young for obvious reasons. If such a man can vanish from our collective memory, then should it be any surprise that the other 400 or so *buffalo soldiers* who shared in this adventure also disappeared?

*It is on them (the noncommissioned officers and privates) that the brunt of the work has fallen. It is they who have lived in camp six months of each year without any but the most meager comforts; who have subsisted on bacon and beans, rather than breaking regulations, even though game was plenty all about them; who have made many lonely bivouacs in the rain*

*and snow, without tents or other cover; who have with great labor ascended high peaks to look for the dust of moving bands of sheep; who have led their horses down into rugged canons, thousands of feet deep, only to lead them out again on the other side; who have fought the awful forest fires; and lastly, who have spent many weary nights of guard duty over captives whom they were, on the coming day, to watch and drive to the next night's camp. Let these devoted men have the full credit for their faithful and arduous services.*

--Lt. N.F. McClure, 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, "Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association," 1897

The character of that "arduous service" can still be found in some of the primary documents. There one can feel the imprint of their lives. The following is a selection from some of the *Patrol Reports* composed by these buffalo soldiers, and that is where the history changes tense and perspective allowing the dead to speak for themselves.

The following is an excerpt of a *Patrol Report* from the archives of Yosemite National Park. These were handwritten documents composed in the field. A series of subposts had been established in the wilderness, and from those posts small detachments of soldiers would scout the trails like a city cop(s) walking a beat, patrolling a set geography in order to establish a presence, and to effectively deal with lawbreakers in the backcountry.

\* \* \*

Place: *Wawona, CA*

Yosemite Time: *August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1903*

Detachment Commander: *Captain J. T. Nance, 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Cavalry*

*At the Tuolumne Meadows Station I found Corporal Holmes and two Privates, Troop "K", 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry in Camp and one private on patrol up Alkali Creek. This detachment has a good camp which, except for the fact that no latrine had been constructed, was in good condition. The grass near this station was excellent and the horses were in good condition. From Corporal Holmes' retained memoranda of scouts, this detachment seems to have properly patrolled its section of the Park.*

*On August 7<sup>th</sup>, a herd of sheep was found by a patrol from this station, on the Tioga Road just inside the Park limits, brand of sheep "O", herder (was) a Spaniard, owner unknown.*

*On August 10<sup>th</sup>, I found the detachment under Sergeant Shelton, Troop "K", 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, camped in Virginia Canon at the mouth of the East Fork of Virginia Creek. The*

*memoranda of scouts show that the men of this detachment have done a great deal of patrolling in Virginia, Slipper's (?) and Matterhorn Canons, and that with a detachment from Tuolumne Meadows Station, one scout was made to near the head of Conners (?) Creek. Four herds of sheep, about 5750 in all, had been removed from the park since August 1<sup>st</sup>.*

*The country in the vicinity of this station is very rough, and the trails are reported to be exceedingly difficult, practically nothing but sheep trails. The horses of this detachment are very thin and show sign of hard work and short forage. In the vicinity of this station the grazing is not good and horses have had less than half grain forage.*

*On August 10<sup>th</sup>, there was on hand at this station but four (4) sacks about 280 pounds of grain (six horses at station). This camp was not well policed and instructions were given to have it cleaned. This detachment seems to have done its patrol work very satisfactorily, but the work is telling on the horses and I do not believe they will stand it more than a week or ten days longer unless they can be provided with practically full grain forage and better grazing can be found...*

*Very respectfully, J.T. Nance, Captain 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Commanding Detachment.*

The preceding *patrol report* conveys a sense of what the day to day working lives of these soldiers was like in the remoteness of Yosemite's high country, but that was not the only setting they experienced. The following *news report* comes from the Saturday, August 29, 1903 edition of the *Mariposa Gazette*, a local newspaper as well as the oldest in California. The town of Raymond, near Yosemite, was the main shipping point for resupplying the Army's expeditionary force. This fact explains their presence in Raymond, but the story illustrates some of the "unexpected" dangers facing "Colored" soldiers in the Sierra Nevada.

### Raymond Shooting

A disastrous shooting affray occurred at Raymond Sunday night at midnight that may cost the driver of the ambulance belonging to the Ninth United States cavalry, located at Wawona, his life. A crowd of the colored troopers doing range duty in the National Park congregated at the saloon of the California hotel and after a considerable portion of liquor had been imbibed, indulged in rough talk. Some of the remarks were directed towards the proprietor of the

hotel, William Duncan, who resented them and told the colored men so. Ben Bane, the ambulance driver, then threatened to carve Duncan's heart out. Duncan stepped to the end of the counter, where his revolver was placed, and before the crowd could realize what had happened, had shot Bane through the stomach. Bane dropped to the floor insensible and an exciting scene followed. Some of the soldiers threatened to kill the proprietor through revenge. Duncan however held his ground and with smoking revolver in his hand, said he would shoot on the spot the first man that made a move to draw.

The confusion gradually gave place to order and the wounded man was taken to a room in the hotel and doctor summoned...

(Fresno Republican)

The article ended with the report of Mr. Duncan being taken into custody. Two months later the following article appeared in the *Mariposa Gazette* on Saturday, October 31, 1903. Keep in mind that military stewardship of national parks was a summer duty, so by the time this article appeared, the Ninth Cavalry had left the Sierra.

#### Case Dismissed

The preliminary examination of Wm. Duncan, charged with assault with a deadly weapon with intent to commit (illegible!) last Saturday. The district attorney represented the people and R. L. Hargrove looked after the interests of the defendant.

The civilian teamster Bain, who was shot by Duncan, failed to put in an appearance although he had been subpoenaed as a witness.

There were no eye witnesses in the shooting but those who arrived on the scene soon after testified that Bain had said that he threatened to cut Duncan's heart out. The district attorney moved that the case be dismissed as there was not sufficient evidence to warrant holding the defendant over. The defendant was discharged. —Madera Tribune

What I find especially interesting here is the second article's assertion that "there were no eye witnesses in the shooting". It is obvious from the first article that there was a room full of *buffalo soldiers*. Yet, even the *Gazette* seems to regard these soldiers as invisible men. Certainly there is a history in California of disallowing the testimony of Chinese Americans, Indians, and African-Americans during the middle years of the Nineteenth century. For example:

In April 1850, the (California) state legislature passed a law that denied nonwhite testimony in any cases where whites were involved. It provided that

No black or mulatto person or Indian shall be permitted to give evidence in favor of or against any white person. Every person who shall have one eighth part or more of Negro blood shall be deemed a mulatto, and every person who shall have one half Indian blood shall be deemed an Indian.

—from p. 192, Blacks in Gold Rush California, by Rudolph M. Lapp, Yale University Press, 1977

The incident in Raymond stands in marked contrast to another that occurred a few years *earlier* in the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoia in Yosemite National Park.

In 1899, a group of VIP's visited Yosemite. Lt. McMasters of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, who was Acting Superintendent, asked Gabriel Souvulewski, an ex-soldier, but at that point serving as a guide and packer, if he would accompany this group into the Mariposa Grove.

Mr. Souvulewski acceded to this request but unfortunately at lunchtime he was not invited to sit and eat with these dignitaries. Souvulewski endured this slight in silence, and upon his return to the park headquarters at Wawona said nothing to McMasters. Later that evening, when McMasters asked him to escort yet another group of prominent individuals to the same area Souvulewski made the comment that perhaps this time he should provide his own "bread and bacon".

He related to the officer his experience, and McMasters severely chastised that party for their conduct. He also expressed confidence that there would be no repeat of the earlier slight. Satisfied Mr. Souvulewski went to the Wawona Hotel the following morning and was introduced to "*Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Senior, his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and the daughter and secretary of the senior Rockefeller.*" Souvulewski accompanied

this new group of VIP's into the Mariposa Grove. He took with him a soldier of the Twenty-fourth Infantry, identified in James V. Lloyd's letter simply as a "colored orderly" who was entrusted with the care of the horses. This freed Souvulewski so that he could devote all of his attention to the guests.

*Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Senior, a very sweet, charming lady, made the trip in a buggy, taking along a wonderful lunch for the party.*

These guests were indeed of a different sort, and they did show appreciation for the services that were provided for them. John D. Rockefeller, Sr. rode *alongside* Souvulewski surprising him with that courtesy, but there was more to come. Soon they arrived in the Mariposa Grove.

*At luncheon, served under the great green canopy of the mighty sequoias, of the Mariposa Grove, Mrs. Rockefeller invited both Mr. Souvulewski and the colored orderly to eat with them. Not only that, but Mrs. Rockefeller skillfully questioned the colored orderly so as to bring out many interesting incidents of his experiences in the Spanish American War in Cuba. He virtually monopolized the conversation and it was thoroughly enjoyed by all.*

(—Souvulewski quotes from a "Letter by James V. Lloyd," *Gabriel Souvulewski* File, Yosemite Research Library, Yosemite National Park)

These two incidents are remarkable in their contrasting portraits of race relations in the Sierra around 1900. In one situation a group of *Black cavalrymen* encounter hostility simply trying to get a drink in a saloon, and in the other a *Black infantryman* is invited to both food and drink, and sits with the Rockefellers among the giant sequoia.

These events transpired in two radically different environments; a saloon, and a grove of Big Trees. Do these contrasting environments naturally lend themselves to contrasting behaviors? The former *allows* for the partaking of alcohol, the latter *encourages* the consumption of something much more refined.

Wilderness is often presented as a liberating environment, perhaps it can even free us from ourselves. There is a sense that even in 1899, when *Jim Crow* laws bound the humanity of millions, it felt foolish even for a family as privileged as the Rockefellers to act superior while resting in the shade of the largest living things on earth.

These buffalo soldiers, and the soldiers who preceded and followed them, were carrying out a *mission*, a charge to protect the national parks of the Sierra Nevada. They were all, on the whole, forgotten. Is this *amnesia* the result of racism? Or, is it the fate of all stories to eventually fade from view?

After delving into this history for several years now, it is my thought that race certainly played a part in the *disappearance* of nearly 500 African-American soldiers from their rightful place in national park history, but race was not the only player. The central issue here is *invisibility*. Certainly the invisibility of the *Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada* is enhanced by their ethnicity.

Yet is this invisibility real?. They are an obvious presence in one primary document after another. Stories about them can be found in *Newspapers*. People wrote *Letters* that spoke about them while they served in the Sierra Nevada. They still move about in *Patrol* and *Superintendent Reports*. Their names are listed in military *Muster Rolls*. After injury or illness you can find them still recuperating in *Hospital Papers*. We see them at twilight in *Pension Files*. When they died, a final resting-place was found for them in *War Department Internment Records*.

But does the average national park visitor travel to any of the aforementioned *places*? They are the haunts of historians and researchers, but are peculiar locales for most of us.

The *published* history of any national park rises like an island out of a sea of paper. Our focus is drawn to that island, but it is the depths of the ocean that define and give shape to that which we call solid

ground. If only we would yield more to the allure of the sea, that region of *unpublished* history, then we would find all those lives that speak to us again and again like water flowing over sand. They are not invisible. We have only chosen to not see them.

*Blues for Charles Young, Late Captain of the Ninth Cavalry*

Gone from the mountain  
Gone from the sea  
Gone from the jungle  
Where can I be?

People looking for me  
Watch me disappear  
People looking for me, surely,  
Watch me disappear.

They never saw me, really,  
When I was standing here,  
No, I was never seen at all  
When I was standing here.

So it doesn't really matter,  
That I've died and gone away,  
Say it doesn't really matter  
That I'm dead and gone away,

'Cause even when I rode this earth,  
I was just a stowaway.  
Hiding in a hostile stare,  
Just a stowaway.

Gone from the mountain,  
Gone from the sea  
Gone from the jungle  
What happened to me?

--Shelton Johnson