Watch for GLORYLAND due in bookstores this Fall 2009,
written by Shelton Johnson and published by Sierra Club Books.
For more information, click here.

About the Buffalo Soldiers of Yosemite National Park

Around the turn of the last century more than 400 African-American soldiers patrolled Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. The Buffalo Soldiers were African-American cavalrymen who in 1903, shortly after their return from the Philippines and the Spanish-American War, found themselves garrisoned at San Francisco's Presidio with no assignment. This turned out to be the right place at the right time, for Yosemite had been declared a national park in 1890. The government decided to use the Army to protect Yosemite and the people who used the park from each other.

The 9th Cavalry drew the assignment and history was made. In the Sierra Nevada, the Buffalo Soldiers regularly endured long days in the saddle, encountered racism, and estrangement from family and friends. As military stewards, the African American cavalry and infantry regiments protected the park from illegal grazing, poaching, forest fires, and timber thieves. These soldiers built the first trail to the top of Mt. Whitney, highest mountain in the United States at that time, in Sequoia National Park in 1903, as well as the first museum in what would eventually become the National Park System in Yosemite National Park in 1904.

However, the pivotal role these soldiers played in the early history of the national parks became yet another forgotten story. That is, until Yosemite Park Ranger Shelton Johnson realized that a photograph from 1899 depicting several African-American soldiers on horseback was actually taken in Yosemite. Additional research turned up other information, including Army Muster Rolls from the late 19th and early 20th century. These documents confirmed that African Americans had served in the park in far greater numbers than was originally thought.

About Park Ranger Shelton Johnson

Shelton Johnson, a native of Detroit, Michigan, has worked as a U.S. Park Ranger since 1987. His work assignments have included Yellowstone National Park, park areas within and around Washington D.C., Great Basin National Park, and Yosemite National Park. He served with the Peace Corps in Liberia, West Africa, and attended Graduate School at the University of Michigan, majoring in Poetry. Ranger Johnson has won several writing awards, including a Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship, a Scholarship to the Cranbrook Writer's Conference, a Michael Gutterman Award, and a Major Hopwood Award in Poetry, all from the University of Michigan.

Recent accomplishments include graduating from Yosemite's Mounted Horse Patrol School in 1996, being selected as a member of a National Park Service Delegation to mainland China during the summer of 2000, personally representing the Director of the National Park Service while riding in an equestrian unit in the 2001 Tournament of Roses Parade, being chosen as the Pacific West Regional recipient of the Freeman Tilden Award, the highest award given by the National Park Service for Interpretation in 2002, having the day of February 13, 2002 named in his honor by the Mayor of Warrensville Heights, OH, including a Ceremonial Resolution passed by the City Council of Warrensville Heights, OH.

He serving as a Keynote Speaker at the National Interpreters Workshop in Reno, NV in 2003, the first such keynote address at the national conference by an employee of the federal government, and being asked to accept a Resolution passed by the California Legislative Black Caucus honoring the contribution made to Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks by the Buffalo Soldiers, an event held in the California State Assembly in Sacramento on August 28, 2003. He performed at the 2003 Mariposa Storytelling Festival, the rededication of the Booker T. Washington Tree in Sequoia National Park in 2003, and the dedication of the Charles Young Tree in 2004. These are the only giant sequoia named for African-Americans.

On June 30, 2005, Ranger Johnson received a Cultural Heritage Award at the 34th Anniversary Dinner for the Center for Law in the Public Interest in Beverly Hills, CA. This recognition was for his work on educating the public about the contributions of the buffalo soldiers. At this same event he also received a Commendation from the Los Angeles City Council, a Certificate of Appreciation from U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer and two Certificates of Special Congressional Recognition from members of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Ranger Johnson has been profiled in Dudley Edmondson's Black and Brown Faces in America's Wild Places (2006), a book of interviews with people of color who have chosen careers in the outdoors. He has also been profiled in the University of Michigan's Minority Environmental Leadership Development Initiative (MELDI) website under the School of Natural Resources and Environment. During the spring of 2006, Johnson was interviewed by documentary filmmaker Ken Burns for his upcoming film about the national parks, appropriately titled The National Parks. This is the first documentary film about the evolution of the national parks and will air on PBS television stations nationwide in 2009. In addition, a short film about Ranger Johnson's work is scheduled to be produced by Florentine Films, will serve as a bonus chapter on the DVD of the Ken Burns' film, and be shown separately on PBS. In August of 2006,

Ranger Johnson received a commission as a Kentucky Colonel from the governor of Kentucky. This is the highest honor awarded by the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and was for Johnson's work searching for buffalo soldier descendants. In August of 2007, Ranger Johnson was featured in a new version of "Oh Ranger!" a classic book first published in 1928. The original "Oh Ranger!" was written by N.P.S. co-founder Horace Albright and journalist Frank Taylor. Ranger Johnson also received Certificates of Recognition in 2007 for his work on the buffalo soldier story; first from Yvonne B. Burke, Supervisor, Second District, County of Los Angeles; second from Karen Bass, Majority Leader, California State Assembly, 47th District, California Legislature.

Ranger Johnson has presented "Yosemite Through the Eyes of a Buffalo Soldier, 1904" at venues across the United States including the Oakland, Fresno, and Haggin Museums in California, and public schools in Cleveland, Ohio upon the request of the local PBS affiliate. Most recently he has performed at the Department of Interior's Yates Auditorium in Washington, D.C., the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia, and the International Storytelling Center in Tennessee, all in 2004. Ranger Johnson is also the first NPS employee to perform at the International Storytelling Center.

Here in California his work has been featured on PBS television programs such as Huell Howser's California's Gold, The Best of California, and California Connected. Major newspaper coverage includes Nzong Hiong's article in the Fresno Bee on October 4, 2001, Carl Nolte's article in the San Francisco Chronicle on February 1, 2003, Brian Melley's article for The Associated Press on February 2, 2003, and Lee Romney's Column One story on the front page of the Los Angeles Times on February 15, 2003. Ranger Johnson has also had radio interviews with PBS/WVIZ in Cleveland, OH, as well as the BBC, NPR, and Voice of America. A radio interview/podcast with Ranger Johnson about the buffalo soldier story is available through the National Parks Conservation Association website (http://www.npca.org), and also aired on Public Radio International's Living on Earth program. It's the first episode of the N.P.C.A.'s Park Stories series (2007). That episode entitled "Tour Yosemite with a Buffalo Soldier" won the 2008 Award of Excellence from the Central California Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America's annual Image Awards competition in the podcast/weblog category.

His living history program has also been selected by Sunset Magazine as one of the best interpretive programs in the western United States.

A DVD has been made of "Yosemite through the Eyes of a Buffalo Soldier". This DVD captures Johnson's performance as Sgt. Elizy Boman, Troop "K", 9th Regiment of Cavalry. It may also be available upon request. Information about the Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada is also available on line at http://shadowsoldier.wilderness.net

Recent News

Ranger Johnson was recently given an award from the Yosemite Fund to finance the Sierra Nevada Buffalo Soldier Genealogy Research Project. The goal of this project is to find some of the descendants of the Buffalo Soldiers who served in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks, and then hold a family reunion in Yosemite Valley which would also feature historians and experts on this forgotten story who would speak about the contributions of the Ninth Cavalry and Twenty-fourth Infantry to the preservation of Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks.

A private researcher, and former employee of the National Archives, has been hired to find as many of these descendants as possible. African-Americans constitute an underrepresented population in the national parks, but if the contributions of the Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada were better known, perhaps this would lead to a greater sense of ownership of wilderness areas among African-Americans not just in California, but nationwide.

Three descendants; two grandsons, and a granddaughter of Thomas Smith Tyler, a buffalo soldier who served in Yosemite in 1899, have been found living in Atchinson, Kansas. These are the first descendants that have been located as part of the Buffalo Soldier Research Project.