

A Perilous View

Shelton Johnson

Finding George

ON MAY 18, 1903, at the Presidio of San Francisco, after three years of service with the Ninth Cavalry, Private George Metcalf of Frankfort, Kentucky, was discharged from the U.S. Army. What kind of day was it during his last hours as a soldier? Did fog roll in, obscuring Fort Point, and the thoughts of a man who found himself illuminated by a final sunrise? No more bugles. He could decide for himself what to do on the following day. There must've been a release, but also giddiness and fear accompanying *freedom*.

There were no parades in his honor, no confetti flung from the roof tops. No admiring throngs spoke his name. He was just another soldier, his duty done, moving on to new adventures. History would soon forget him. He would be reduced to a scribble on a ledger. On the muster rolls written for Troop "K", the notation stated:

Discharged at Presidio of S. F. Cal., May 18, 1903 per expiration of term of service.
Discharge and Final Statements given. Due soldier for clothing not drawn in kind
Three dollars and Sixteen cents (\$3.16) For deposits Ninety Dollars (\$90.00).
Character "Excellent."

Those few words can't measure the weight upon George Metcalf on that day. How would *you* have felt after three years in the Army? For three years your life belonged to others. Superiors determined *when* your day began, *what* you did while awake, *where* you slept at night, and *how* you might die tomorrow. You were a soldier. Follow orders. *God* was a first sergeant who hated you. *Home* was a place you went to when you slept. *Family* was Troop "K". They were *brothers*. You'd die for them. They'd die for you. This was survival. And now after three years of taking orders, a moment as thin as paper, you're on your own, no longer part of that family. You're an ex-soldier with choices to make.

Which did you decide, George Metcalf? Did you imagine a ranch in Montana, riding horses when *you* wanted to? Were you hoping to get back to Kentucky? Was there someone *there* waiting? What was her name? Or, did you just want to not move anymore, simply be

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here? Were these your thoughts on May 18, 1903? Could you have imagined that the only thing left of you on that day would be: “Character, excellent.”

Certainly there is more written somewhere about Pvt. Metcalf, but until 2001, it was all that I knew of him. He was one of hundreds of Buffalo Soldiers who served in Yosemite and Sequoia national parks in 1899, 1903, and 1904. For each of these men a similar day would dawn, or perhaps they would die, still a soldier, alone, or with comrades close by. Whatever their final moments may have been, they all passed into this story. However scattered they may be now, history binds them together in death as surely as hard military discipline bound them together in life.

People whose history has been forgotten suffer a different kind of death. Not only are they physically absent, but their legacy also *disappears*. It’s the void where lives collect in documents. Nothing organic remains, just shadows cast into faded paper, dumped in vaults, boxes, holes. Most of these soldiers are in a hole. They didn’t dig it, or perhaps weren’t even aware that it was being dug each and every day they were alive. Aware or not, their destiny was to fall into that hole. It’s so dark in that hole that there’s no memory of light.

Down there was George Metcalf. He probably would’ve remained there forever had it not been for Larry Montgomery, a seasonal ranger here in Yosemite Valley. In 2005, as I was sitting in my office going over Ninth Cavalry muster rolls, which are lists of soldiers in particular troops, and commentary about their status, Larry happened to stop by. Larry’s from Kentucky. You can hear Kentucky when he speaks. Not just in his words; it’s how his sentences move that’s Kentucky. George Metcalf was from Frankfort, Kentucky, so I wondered if his speech sang in a similar way: “Hey, Larry,” I said. “There’s a soldier here from Kentucky, why don’t you take a look?”

Figure 1. “Negro troopers of the 24th Infantry,” photograph by Celia Crocker Thompson, 1899. Courtesy of Yosemite National Park Library.



I handed over the muster rolls and Larry read what was written and exclaimed, “George Metcalf! The Metcalfs? I know the Metcalfs from Frankfort. They’ve lived there for over 100 years!” I thought he was joking. He wasn’t.

That summer I walked around Yosemite Valley presenting my living history program, aware that I’d found the relatives of one of Yosemite’s Buffalo Soldiers, or one of those relatives, through Larry Montgomery, had found me. Do we discover history, or does history discover us?

Private Metcalf never served here in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, but he was a soldier with Troop “K”, which ventured to Yosemite barely one month before he was discharged from the Ninth. George Metcalf remains part of that story. He was a veteran of the Philippine-American War, and was garrisoned at the Presidio of San Francisco. Like his peers, he was from the South. They’d served together, sharing hardships and death. The *memory* of George Metcalf journeyed through Yosemite though the *man* did not.

I’d found George, or had been found by him. George Metcalf claimed me just as surely as I’ve claimed him. My research had turned into a lifeline tossed into a dark hole, someone had tugged at the other end, and now, slowly, they were being pulled free. What must that feel like to be forgotten for a hundred years, and then to suddenly have people saying your name, wondering about you as if you’d never been forgotten? Of course, for the Metcalfs, George was always a part of family history.

A few days ago I spoke to Mr. Derrick Graham, the great-grandnephew of George Metcalf. Mr. Graham is a schoolteacher in Frankfort, Kentucky. He told me that George never married, and that he was the only brother of four sisters, but all I could think of in that moment was that I was on the telephone with a relative of Pvt. George Metcalf. In those few minutes, this history was no longer superintendent reports, patrol reports, muster rolls, letters, or miscellaneous correspondence, it was a conversation about someone real, someone who had sisters, who was remembered by people who were alive. Somewhere there was a heart beating, and a breath taken. There was blood flowing. Tears.

George was alive while I was talking to Derrick Graham, alive in a way that he had not been over years of research. Now it was personal. Now it was the way *he* walked, the way *he* spoke, how *he* held a cigar. Now it was the dreams *he* had. It was so different. George had found me. For years I had been reaching my hands out into darkness, and when I least expected it, someone had clasped them, held them. I was no longer solely in this time, and George was no longer a creature of that time. A bridge had been built beneath us, we had taken a few steps, and met amazed in the middle of that span.

Now the history no longer sleeps in yellowed documents, but shines in the eyes of George Metcalf. They look out into *this* world through his living cousins, nephews, and nieces. He was never forgotten in those households. What is it all made from, those *nails*, the *glue*, and *bolts* that keep a story together? It can all fall apart elsewhere, but in every family memories can be kept like heirlooms, without shelf or cabinet, there behind the eyes.

Yet, I have only found a part of George. The totality of a life can’t be captured in a photograph. He stares out from a fragment of a time and a place. He can’t be restored completely without the restoration of the world that he knew. But before the arrival of this gift, this

portrait that has bound us both in something living, there was little to hold. One day soon, perhaps, I shall look up from my desk, and there before me will be Derrick Graham, a man from Kentucky with a story to tell. He will extend his hand, and I will take it, and then, finally, I will have come as close as I can in this world to finding George.

Who now prays for George Metcalf, or the thousands who left the Old South to find something, or run from something that had no name? In what place today still dwell those ambitious, yet fearful shadows that eventually found refuge in the Old Army? One by one they drifted into that system like leaves to the sky and were reborn as privates, corporals, and sergeants. They became cavalrymen or infantrymen. They were given a new purpose. They rode, marched, drilled, fought, slept, and died. Each of those men has a story. Some of those stories bind Yosemite, Sequoia, and the Presidio of San Francisco into one narrative. The Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada is just one of those stories. Throughout America, other George Metcalfs wait to speak.

When I peer into the muster rolls that house their names, I glimpse 400 other shadows that once were living men. They wait to be found. Most are from the Deep South, but some hail from northern cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago; or western cities like Kansas City, Denver, and San Francisco. What are *their* stories? Are flowers still strewn over their graves, or do they lie forgotten in the shade of trees?

Once upon a time, the Buffalo Soldiers rode into the Sierra. Lit by the granite around them, they built the first trail to the top of Mount Whitney, the first wagon road into Giant Forest, the first museum in the national parks, *and then they were gradually taken from our memory* even though they served as some of the first national park rangers in the world. Remembrance is the greatest honor that can be bestowed on any story. It's the shining of a light into the darkness. The shadow of Jim Crow could've erased the Buffalo Soldiers from history forever, but here in the present we can choose to reach back into those yesterdays, hold up to the light their service today, and secure a tomorrow where awareness of their contributions will become an inextinguishable flame.

Finding George's voice

When you rediscover a legacy that has as its hallmark the building of the first usable wagon road into Sequoia's Giant Forest, the first trail to the top of Mount Whitney (the highest mountain in the United States in 1903), and the construction of the first museum in what would become the national park system, everything sounds great until you peer a little closer. The photograph that you're staring into is a window through which you see five men on horseback, somewhere in Yosemite. It was taken by a young woman named Celia Crocker Thompson in June of 1899. At first glance, you discern that they're wearing the same clothing, perceive that they all have carbines slung over their shoulders, and the combination of uniforms and weapons, forge an image of soldiers within seconds.

It's at this point that the viewer begins to make assumptions which distort the view. The photo is of a group of soldiers in Yosemite National Park, so it would be easy for some to assume that the soldiers are Euro-American, primarily because those are the images that we all have been fed for over 100 years, but this particular story of national park stewardship

by African Americans was forgotten, or to be precise, *untold* for nearly just as long. With the publication of the first western novel, Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, published in 1902, and the first western film, *The Great Train Robbery*, directed by Edwin Porter in 1903, Americans were introduced to a re-vision of the American West that essentially had no cultural diversity other than Native Americans.

The *real* West was quite the opposite, peppered with immigrants from all over the world, *and* African Americans. This condition has not only distorted our collective view of western history, it has created an environment within which it has become difficult to see the presence of people who have been there all along, but forced to the edges of photographs, letters, reports, diaries, memoirs, and other documents of the frontier period.

This ethnic *relocation* shaped my approach to interpreting the Buffalo Soldiers of the Sierra Nevada. I recognized at the outset that I would be telling a story that contradicted the historical perception of the majority of the people who would be attending my performances. African American visitors to Yosemite are a numerical minority, so I would be speaking to people whose perception of Yosemite during its pioneer period was very different from the vision of Yosemite that had been created for me as a result of my primary research into the military stewardship of Yosemite and Sequoia national parks, as well as my use of a different cultural lens. The racial attitudes that allowed for the disappearance of the Buffalo Soldiers from the memories of the dominant culture that surrounded them *yesterday*, also allow for the continuance of that invisibility which, to some degree, still cloaks their legacy *today*, for that's the power of Race in America.

To say that "the past isn't what it used to be" is a provocative statement, yet there's truth in that phrase. History itself, the history that was actually lived by those who participated in it, can never change, but for those of us who are reading these words right now, our orientation to that past is always subject to change as the experiences that we all undergo in our lives continue to reshape our sensibilities. We're all in the process of envisioning the world in new ways.

My own perception of Yosemite shifted instantly when I found out that Buffalo Soldiers served as park rangers over a decade before the creation of the National Park Service. It was astonishing to discover that African Americans had played a stewardship role in Yosemite, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, over a decade before Stephen Mather and Horace Albright became the first leaders of a new agency charged with safeguarding America's Best Idea. It was more disturbing to realize that there were more African Americans, by far, playing such a role in the Sierra 100 years ago than there are today. I am one of literally a handful of African American NPS employees stationed in Yosemite, but at the turn of the last century *there were hundreds*.

So, how best to tell this story? Should I tell it as a park ranger? Or, should I clothe myself in the uniform of a Buffalo Soldier? I tried the first, failed, and chose the latter out of necessity. The story needed to be told, and I realized why I had failed *once I became a Buffalo Soldier*. An African American man telling a story charged with the racial animus of the late 19th century, to an audience that was nearly completely European American, was fraught with dangers both seen and unseen, so I discovered that it was much easier to tell that same history

from the inside out, rather than the outside in, through first-person living history. It's easy to debate another individual's perception of history, but it's much harder *to challenge someone's account of their own life*. As a ranger I could not only feel people's discomfort with what I was saying, *I was uncomfortable with the words that I had to use* in order to effectively render not only what America was like 100 years ago, but what words a U.S. Cavalry soldier, who was also a black Indian and a sharecropper's son, might've spoken describing his life growing up in the Jim Crow South, his service during the Indian Wars, the Philippine Insurrection, and finally his encounters with a Yosemite that was only thirteen years old.

In general, visitors have been willing to engage with Sgt. Elizy Boman, Troop "K", Ninth Regiment of Cavalry, and the result has been an illuminating experience for nearly everyone because my "character" accepts responsibility for his own condition. He's philosophical about his life, and non-accusatory in terms of assigning responsibility for the life that he has lived. Consequently, it's easier for the park visitor to really hear what Sgt. Boman is saying, and, more importantly, see the human being beneath that uniform. This is the foundation for the success of "Yosemite Through the Eyes of a Buffalo Soldier."

The voice that I use in the following fictional letter was inspired by the actual voices of Buffalo Soldiers who wrote their own letters to the "Colored" newspapers of the day from Cuba, and the Philippines, describing their experiences with war to loved ones back home. Many of these letters can be found in Willard B. Gatewood, Jr.'s book, *Smoked Yankees and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898 to 1902*.

But it will always be the photograph taken by Celia Crocker Thompson that drives this discovery, and the eyes of those Buffalo Soldiers staring out at me from the same park I work in today, but with the startling recognition that their Yosemite was vastly different from my Yosemite. As lovely, but far more perilous.

A Buffalo Soldier writes from Yosemite

October 1903

To the Editor, *Cleveland Gazette*:

I'm writing this letter to you because I want our people to know that there's a place for them here in California. I want to tell them that you don't have to die to get to the Promised Land. All you need is a good horse!

This place is a national park called Yosemite. My fellow soldiers and I rode to Yosemite from San Francisco—280 miles—in only 13 days. Every morning, the Sierra Nevada got bigger and bigger. The fact that these mountains were white with snow in May was mighty troubling for a boy from Georgia.

We arrived in the park's headquarters on May 7th. Camp Wood wasn't much to look at, just row after row of white tents, like corn planted in a field. It all seemed ordinary after riding through Mariposa Grove, where the giant sequoia stand. It was all so much to take in that I wanted to close my eyes, many times, and just catch my breath.

Well, soon enough I found myself so busy that there was no time to be breathless. Our camp was just to one side of the Wawona Road, which takes you up to Yosemite Valley from the south. It's a decent "path in the mountains," but it'd just be an alley back home in Macon. They call it a dirt road, but dust road is closer to the truth. Every time a wagon rolls by, the air turns so gray you can taste granite in your mouth.

My first duty was to stand on that road, stop people from coming in, and collect their firearms, if they had them. They could pick them up on their way out. But if they were leaving a different way, I'd have to seal them up and issue a permit to carry.

Lucky for me, I didn't spend too much time with that particular duty. Most of my days were spent on patrol in the high country. High country means snow stinging your face and winds that make your body ache. And even though you're riding with other men, just the size of Yosemite makes you feel alone, and, well, small.

There are posts or "substations" all over the wilderness. My captain, Captain Nance, visits each post once a month checking in on the condition of our horses and supplies. We live at one cabin for a month, and then another cabin someplace else for a month, all over the park.

Captain Nance reads our patrol ledgers to check up on the work we've been doing. We record all sorts of things in these ledgers. For example, we report on the sheep herds we brand with a "P." They aren't allowed to graze in these meadows anymore. We removed 15,000 sheep from the park this past summer, and their sheepherders, too. It was a mighty big job. I wish I could forget the look on the faces of some of those sheepherders. They were just trying to make a living, but they were just in the wrong place.

Our ledgers also report the forest fires we fight here. This summer we had 10. Only two were big enough to tell a story, and even those two fires only got a sentence or two in a ledger, something about fires "caused by the carelessness of campers or tourists." But was there any mention of us soldiers wielding axes, rakes, hoes, or shovels; soldiers sweating on a mountainside, choking on smoke, breathing fire, coughing up black spit? No, but it don't matter.

We give orders, and we obey commands. That's what you do when you're a soldier. We do what we are told to do, the best way we can. We have a sort of code: Do your duty. Don't complain. Help the man next to you if he needs it, 'cause one day he'll help you if you need it. Don't ask for anything you don't need. Take care of yourself and others. Most important of all, if you're cavalry take good care of your horse.

Did I mention that the "campers and tourists" in Yosemite are usually white? This might shock readers back East. Most white campers and tourists aren't used to taking orders from soldiers who look like us. In fact, they're not comfortable taking orders from Colored folk at any time.

It's not too comfortable giving the orders, either. If you're a Buffalo Soldier serving with the Ninth Cavalry in Yosemite, most likely you were born and raised in the South. You were taught at an early age that to disrespect a white person is to invite violence upon yourself.

The thing is, the mountains and the valleys—they don't care what color I am. That's why I love Yosemite. Whatever bad thing happens to me here is rarely personal. If a tree falls on me, it isn't because it's a bigot. If a grizzly bear mauls me, it isn't because my daddy and mama are sharecroppers, or were enslaved before that. If I fall off a cliff, it isn't because the ground thinks I "had it coming." Knowing all of this just makes me wake up to what's real and ignore the things that don't matter.

What's real is the sun climbing up over the edge of the world, how warm it feels on my face, holding me like my mama did when I was a boy. It's how the mountains catch fire every morning when the sky's clear and how calm it all is, like it's expected. This sunrise has been expected since the world began, and here I am on a horse, waiting for daylight to show me where I need to go.

What's lit up out there is Yosemite. All of what I see belongs to me as much as any man. My job is to protect it. I know I can't put it in my saddle bag, or stuff it in a haversack. But it belongs to me in a way that's deeper than anything bought with money. Maybe we lay greater claim to what we protect, to what we safeguard, and to what we hold dear.

Well, that's what Troop "L" has been doing here since May of this year. If you could tell all of your readers what I just said, I'll be happy!

Sincerely yours,

Pvt. Trezzant Jones
Troop "L," Ninth Regiment of Cavalry
Reds Meadow Substation, near Devil's Postpile
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