

The iron riders

Portland author Pferron Doss recounts the unusual history of the all-black 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps, and in the process explores the state of race relations, then and now

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In June 1897, 20 African American infantry men rode their bicycles from Missoula, Mont., to St. Louis, Mo., a 1,900-mile trip that took 41 days.

Those men made up the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps, the first military regiment in United States' history that was equipped with – and traveled by – bicycles. The Bicycle Corps was commissioned in 1892 by the U.S. Army at a time when bicycles were highly popular. The corps' purpose was to travel throughout the country collecting geographic and topographical information, document road conditions, sources of supplies, and other information that could be useful to the military.

The Bicycle Corps and the men who were a part of it are the subject of "Ole Freedom," a historical novel written by Portland author Pferron Doss. Doss taught the history of the bicycle corps in the Black Studies department at the University of Montana and in 1974 led a reenactment of the bicycle trip from Missoula to St. Louis. Doss self-published the book this year, drawing the title from an old Negro spiritual song.

Doss spoke with Street Roots about the Corps, his book and race relations.

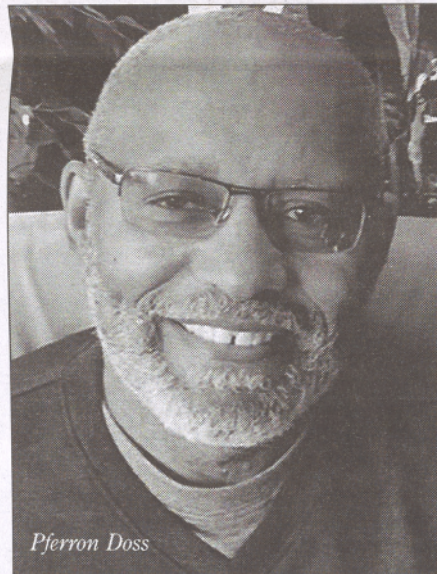
Amanda Waldroupe: How did you first learn about the 25th Bicycle Corps, and what was it about the Corps that captivated you?

Pferron Doss: When I attended the University of Montana from 1969 to 1973, there weren't that many blacks at the university. As a member of Black Student Union we used to go across the state talking about the black experience. Oftentimes, we would get comments like "You don't understand, we've never seen any colored people." Frankly, it ticked us all off. I started going through the library and doing research about blacks in Montana, all the way from the Lewis and Clark Expedition to



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The 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps traveled the western and midwestern states, collecting information for the military



Pferron Doss

the last legal execution of an African American in 1954. The archivist showed me a picture of the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps. I thought it was a fake picture. He said, no, they came here in 1888. I said, "What?!" That started my love affair with the 25th Infantry.

In 1974, I had a chance to interview the sole survivor of the Infantry, Dorsie Willis. Then I had a dream, I dreamt the entire book minus the ending. So I started to write. I was pretty addicted to the book. Wherever I left off in the writing, I had a dream about what would happen next. I got it written and copyrighted. But many rejects. So I put it aside for 25-plus years.

A.W.: When you were a college student talking about the black experience in Montana, what would you talk to people about? What were the experiences like?

P.D.: Well, this will show you how

ignorant people can be. People wanted to know what we ate. Why we grew our hair like Afros. People would come up to us and rub our skin and touch our hair. They wanted to know why we were in Montana and what we were doing in school and if we were getting a free ride. They would say, "We've never seen any blacks except on TV." and they thought that we were pretty violent. "Well," we would say, "wait a minute. Let's talk about that. The indigenous minority in Montana are Native Americans. Think about how you treat the Native Americans, historically and even currently, and you'll understand some of the stuff that we have gone through."

A.W.: That must have been such an alienating experience.

P.D.: Yes, it was. We gotten in a couple scuffles over race and I was even shot at one night.

A.W.: The Bicycle Corps was well-known and respected, right?

P.D.: The 25th went to Montana in 1888. They were garrisoned at Ft. Missoula and they did create an atmosphere where they were appreciated by the local community. When they left in 1898 to go to the Spanish-American War, it was Easter Sunday. Most Sunday churches delayed services so people could go see them off. When the 25th was in its infancy, before World War I, they were pretty respected in the state of Montana. They were at the (site of the) Wounded Knee Massacre the following day, they did the original surveying of the Battle of Little Bighorn, where Custer lost. They were responsible for quelling the mine wars in Idaho. Their involvement in societal as well as military ventures was pretty well known.

But that history has died off.

A.W.: Why do you think that is?

P.D.: It's no different than American history for all minorities. It's in vogue, but it doesn't stay in vogue because if you're trying to deny equal citizen status to everybody or deny it to African Americans specifically, you don't talk about the positive stuff. When I went to school, the history books were 350 pages long and there was one chapter about African Americans. There was slavery and then there was freedom. There was never any talk about the contributions that were made.

A.W.: The men in the Bicycle Corps also played an important role during the Spanish-American War – even though they weren't on bikes.

P.D.: There were members of the Bicycle Corps that were part of the 25th Infantry Regiment. They did not have bicycles, they were just regular fighting soldiers. Everybody grew up knowing that Teddy Roosevelt and the Rough Riders are the ones who charged San Juan Hill. If you look at military records, as I did, you see that Buffalo Soldiers (a nickname for the regiments of black soldiers at the time) broke into the blockhouse and captured the flag. They were not credited for it because of the times. The government was not going to give credit for such an event to black soldiers.

A.W.: There is something very radical and unusual – even phenomenal – about the idea of a group of black men riding bikes halfway across the country, especially the Midwest, in

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