

IRON RIDERS, from page 12

the late 1800s. How do you think the Bicycle Corps was able to even exist?

P.D.: Well, towards the end of the 1800s, Asiatic as well as European countries were beginning to use the bicycle in the military. We caught onto that and wanted to test the bicycle for military purposes, to see how a soldier could get from point A to point B, because horses and cavalry were beginning to get pushed out. They tried shooting guns from a bicycle and it didn't work, and so it died away. It was an experiment and the country never really used the bicycle for combat duties.

A.W.: What made you reenact the bicycle trip in 1974?

P.D.: I was going to do it alone in 1973 and I was outvoted. What better way to reenact the 1897 trip than on the very same day they left, and go across the country to the ration stations that are now cities or towns on the same day that they did. We gave little lectures and talked to people. The value of the trip was twofold: It was in their honor and to show that the black students at the University of Montana could reenact history and put our department on the map. People still talk about it to this day.

A.W.: Why did you choose to write "Ole Freedom" as a historical novel? Why not just research a non-fiction book?

P.D.: I thought that a fictional account of what happened with history was a better way to tell the story. People can relate to stories better than they can a history book. I wanted to create characters and the environment that families and individuals would enjoy and also to show that there was real compassion and hatred in society

during that time. The better way to show it is to show the ways that people had to confront their own individual prejudices and to succeed through that.

A.W.: There is one point in the book where a white officer refers to an African American as "son," not "boy" and it is not meant derogatively, but affectionately. Then you write "Time stood still."

P.D.: In the historical context of race relations, sometimes the dominant society will have a relationship that goes beyond color and race. In the building of those relationships, sometimes a person will slip into a different form of humanity where they accept the person as a person instead of accepting them as a color or a race. When those phrases are used, it illustrates that the person has achieved a personal behavior that exceeds or extends beyond what society has given. I did that a couple times just to show that there is compassion and that the relationships during that period of time weren't all negative.

A.W.: From listening to you speak, Ole Freedom is the culmination of your thoughts and opinions of how you would like society to be and how different racial groups and ethnicities ought to co-exist. You think that relationships and empathy are key.

P.D.: In practical terms, it's very hard to do until you get to know the person. Once you get to know somebody and you start to put worth on their relationship, that will open you up to accept and understand the other person. In society, we do have that. That's what happens when you have relationships and you can break down and peel back the onion layers. You grow. That is what I was wanting to do with "Ole Freedom." I want a reader to grow.

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