

SCRATCHPAD

Buffalo Soldiers and blind spots in American history

How do we reconcile heroism and tragedy?

By **ERICK BENDEL**
COAST WEEKEND

For many of us, the Buffalo Soldiers — the black servicemen who joined the U.S. military after the Civil War and helped stabilize the American West — are a historical blind spot. Apart from their sporadic appearances in pop culture courtesy of Bob Marley and Danny Glover, their contributions are rarely talked about, let alone taught.

But history looks different depending on your view of the action — a fact that the filmmakers behind the documentary “Buffalo Soldiers of the Pacific Northwest” who shot scenes at Fort Stevens State Park last week know well.

On one hand, many of these soldiers were former slaves who, despite their freedom, had little to return to after the war. Joining a cavalry unit was a way to gain dignity and self-respect — to rise in a world that would otherwise trample them. Consider the story of 1st Sgt. Moses Williams, the subject of the film, who earned the Medal of Honor and whose final charge

was maintaining the cannons and ammunition at Fort Stevens in the 1890s.

Historian Greg Shine, speaking recently at the Cannon Beach History Center, said Williams’ legacy “shows the value of black self-determination and agency during the post-war era of Jim Crow and racial animosity,” Nancy McCarthy reported.

On the other hand, in keeping order on the frontier during decades of westward expansion, the Buffalo Soldiers participated, along with their white counterparts, in the destruction of Native American civilization.

“Black soldiers used military service as a strategy to obtain equal rights as citizens, but this came at a cost — the defeat and dispossession of native people,” said Shine, who was interviewed for the film.

According to Jerry Bell Jr., the documentary’s co-director and co-producer, the filmmakers will confront the question: Where do the Buffalo Soldiers stand with Native Americans? Can we see individuals like Williams as heroic figures while acknowledging their role in this wider tragedy?

“It’s a sensitive subject,” Bell said, adding that the film will inte-

grate the perspective of native tribes. “That’s an important piece to share.”

For the filmmakers, the collaboration itself — particularly between Bell and Dru Holley, who conceived the film — is part of the project’s significance. It’s healthy for the communities they come from to see hardworking black artists united on a project, especially one that illuminates the African American experience in this country.

“A lot of young black kids don’t get to see positive images of black men stepping up and working together,” Bell said. **CW**

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Marco Davis, performing as Daylight Cums, is showered with praise and money, while dancing to the song ‘Big Spender’ at the Jane Barnes Revue at the Astoria Event Center in 2015.

PHOTO BY JOSHUA BESSEX

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COAST WEEKEND EDITOR

ERICK BENDEL

CONTRIBUTORS

KATHERINE LACAZE

EVE MARX

BARBARA LLOYD McMICHAEL

PATRICK WEBB

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Phone: 503.325.3211 Ext. 217
or 800.781.3211

Fax: 503.325.6573

E-mail: editor@coastweekend.com

Address: P.O. Box 210 •
949 Exchange St. Astoria,
OR 97103

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