

# Black History

## The Long Journey of the 25th Infantry Bicycle Brigade

By Lisa Loving  
Of *The Skanner News*

Of all the remarkable stories told about the U.S. Army's all-Black cavalries known as the Buffalo Soldiers, the most remarkable is surely that of the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps.

Formed in the late 19th century to test a new military theory that bikes could be an invaluable tool in war, 19 soldiers rode cross-country from Fort Missoula in Montana to St. Louis, Mo., at the end of the 19th century.

"They were a specialized unit who were able to test the bicycle to see if they could be used in lieu of horses," says Pferron Doss, a former Black Studies professor at the University of Missoula.

"The bike never really took off as a military tool, but the energy that took off from the bike corps caught attention worldwide."

Improvements in bicycle construction in the 1890s prompted European and Australian armies to start putting their troops on bikes.

By 1896, the U.S. Army jumped on the bandwagon and tapped the Buffalo Soldiers to set up its bicycle corps in Missoula. Like all Black regiments, it was commanded by a White officer, Lt. James Moss.

The 25th infantry, known as the "Iron Riders," first tested its one-speed Spalding bikes, which were manufactured in Chicago, by going through Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks.

Each soldier carried a 10-pound blanket roll with a tent and supplies stuffed into a carrier on the handlebars; a 10-pound rifle with ammunition, and food in hard cases attached to the frame – all in all the bikes weighed some 60 pounds.

"Their roads were wagon trails, game trails and a whole lot of walking along the railroad tracks," Doss says. "And the weather was terrible."

The following year they beefed up the corps with more soldiers and set off on an epic 40-day, 1902 mile bike trip.

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### Heroes Wrongly Accused

Nine months after completing the trip, the 25th Infantry was shipped out to the Spanish American War.

"But the bicycle itself, the trip, really unified the 25th Infantry as well as the Pacific Northwest because they were really appreciated as colored soldiers," Doss says.

On the battlefield in Cuba, the squad dis-

tinguished itself as one of the most valuable units, capturing the Spanish flag in the fight for El Caney in 1898 and winning the praise of Col. Teddy Roosevelt.

Eight years later, their glowing reputation was brutally destroyed.

"Unfortunately, 1906 in Brownsville, Texas, there was a White citizen that was shot, they blamed it on the 25th Infantry, and then President Roosevelt dishonorably discharged the whole lot of them," Doss said.

Roosevelt's move to fire the 167 soldiers effectively barred them from any future military or civil service jobs. An effort by Booker T. Washington to intervene ended in failure.

Years later historian John D. Weaver published a book-length investigation of the Brownsville Affair, as it had come to be known.

The book prompted a new review by the U.S. Army which found the soldiers innocent. President Richard M. Nixon pardoned them in 1972.



Recreating the Ride

Now a U.S. Forest Service employee in the Portland office, Doss has a unique understanding of the soldiers' story because he and nine others recreated their ride in 1974.

"The route that we took was as close as we could get based on the primary roads became secondary and tertiary roads and

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C O M M U N I T Y C A L E N D A R

## FEBRUARY 2011

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#### Thursday February 24

**HIP HOP MOGUL RUSSELL SIMMONS READS** Russell will talk about his book, "Super Rich: A Guide to Having It All." 7 p.m. -8:30 p.m. Central Library, 1000 Fourth Ave. Free and open to the public.

#### Friday February 25

**HUNTING DINOSAURS ON FOUR CONTINENTS!** Dr. Phillip Currie will discuss his travels uncovering dinosaur fossils from four corners of the globe. The lecture is free but registration is required. 7 p.m. UW Kane Hall 130. Please call 206-543-5590 to register.

#### Saturday February 26

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH COMMUNITY FORUM 2011:** The FBI's war on the Black Panther Party: The fight is not over. 7:30 – 10:30 p.m. New Freeway Hall 5018 Rainier Ave. S.

#### Sunday February 27

**CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT FILM SERIES:** In Honor of Black History Month, "The House We Live In," an

episode from the PBS documentary series "Race: The Power of an Illusion." Phinney Neighborhood Assoc. Room 1. 6532 Phinney Ave. N. Please RSVP to [Katie@phinneycenter.org](mailto:Katie@phinneycenter.org) or call 206-783-2244 3 p.m. – 5 p.m.

#### Tuesday March 1

**FREE BUTTERMILK PANCAKES: NATIONAL PANCAKE DAY CELEBRATION TO BENEFIT CHILDREN'S MIRACLE NETWORK HOSPITAL!** IHOP restaurants will offer

each quest a free short stack of buttermilk pancakes in an effort to raise awareness and funds for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. 7 a.m. – 10 p.m. All nationwide locations.

**FREE ICE SKATING AT KEY ARENA!** The free ice skate offers an ideal afternoon excursion. People of all ages and abilities are welcome to the ice. For skating schedule call 206-733-9576. Key Arena.

### The Links

The Links hosted a Black History Month celebration last week at Portland City Hall, featuring informational displays, a reception and welcome by Mayor Sam Adams.



PHOTO BY JERRY FOSTER