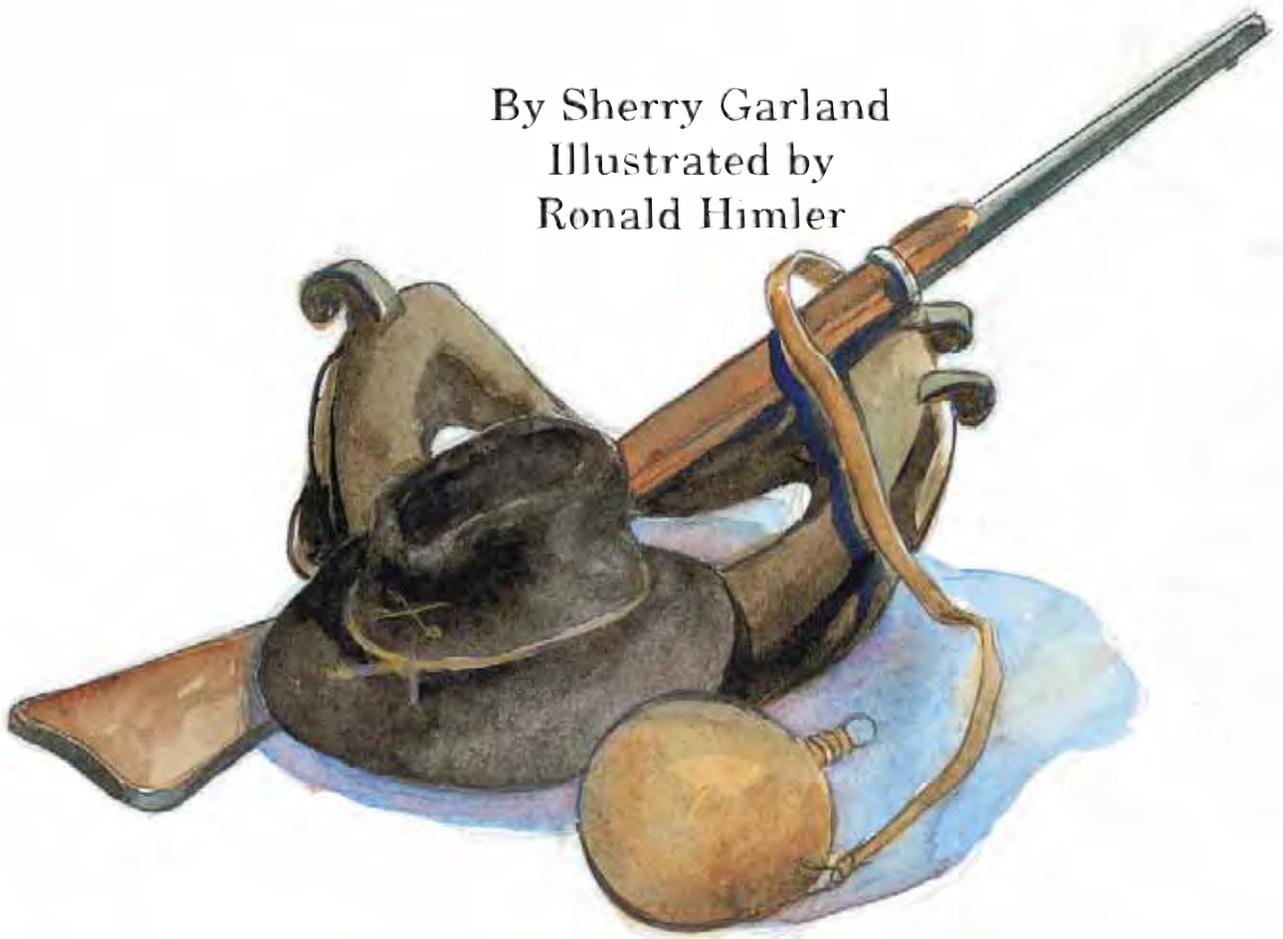


THE BUFFALO SOLDIER

By Sherry Garland
Illustrated by
Ronald Himler



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Summary: Realizing that his future lies in owning land, not just being free, a young man raised as a slave becomes a buffalo soldier—a member of an all-black cavalry regiment formed to protect white settlers from Indians, bandits, and outlaws, and that later fought in the Spanish-American War. Includes historical note.

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Author's Note

Since the American Revolution, African-Americans have shown their ability as soldiers. More than 180,000 fought for the Union during the Civil War, yet they had not been allowed to join the U.S. Army as regulars. Instead, they were placed in “colored volunteer” units.

This changed in 1866 when Congress passed a law that ordered the creation of six black regiments in the regular army—the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Thirty-eighth through Forty-first Infantry regiments. Three years later, the four infantry units were combined to form the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry.

The men who joined these regiments were single men from all occupations, with the majority being farmers. Many were former slaves. They joined the army to escape dire poverty, earn a steady income, gain respect, get away from a past of slavery, and receive an education. The majority could not read or write because of laws in slave states that forbade it. As enlisted men, they could not become high-ranking officers. Their commanders were always white, but many of the tough, experienced sergeants were black.

The new black regiments were immediately transported to the Western frontier of the United States to occupy military forts in Kansas, Indian Territory, and Texas. They later served in New Mexico, Arizona, the mountain states, and the Great Plains states. Their duties were to protect settlers from hostile Indians, rustlers, outlaws like Billy the Kid, and Mexican banditos. They guarded mail routes, helped build forts and roads, assisted in mapping uncharted areas, oversaw distribution of food on some Indian reservations, and protected tele-

graph and railroad crews. In fact, one-fifth of the U.S. Cavalry was African-American at that time.

During one of their earliest skirmishes with Indians, the troopers of the Tenth Cavalry were dubbed “buffalo soldiers” by the Cheyenne, probably because of the similarity between the soldiers’ curly hair and the curly hair on the head of the buffalo, but also because of their tenacity and bravery, two characteristics of the buffalo long admired by the Plains Indians. The nickname soon spread to the Ninth Cavalry, then to the black infantry regiments. As time passed, the name would be applied to all black regiments.

The buffalo soldiers faced many hardships during the Indian Wars of 1866-90, from freezing blizzards on the Great Plains to blistering desert heat in the rugged Southwest. They often were given inferior horses and supplies and the most undesirable assignments. They sometimes faced harsh racial prejudice from local residents, but the black soldiers time and again displayed their courage and loyalty. The black regiments had the lowest desertion rates of any. Eighteen buffalo soldiers won the Congressional Medal of Honor during the Indian Wars.

In 1898, buffalo soldiers charged up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish-American War, and they later served in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Mexico. They continued to serve in the U.S. Army through all American wars. During the Korean War (1950-53), the “buffalo soldier” regiments were officially dissolved. At that time, segregation in the army was done away with, and black soldiers fought alongside American soldiers of all colors and origins.