

The news come on a hot, dusty day in June,
eighteen hundred and sixty-five.
Word spread like prairie fire from the Big House,
through the Quarters, down to the bottom fields
where Mama and us was chopping cotton.



Ol' Master, he look pale as a ghost
when he ride up and say,
"The cruel war is over at last.
You'll be my slaves no more."

Sister, she shout and sing the jubilee;
but Mama, she fall down on her knees and cry.





Seems like this being freedmen's
not what it's cracked up to be.
One day Mama up and says,
"We still got no land, got no money.
What we got is plenty of sweat and toil,
plowing 'nother man's fields, picking 'nother man's cotton."

So I walk to New Orleans and put my X on the line
when I hear tell the U.S. Army is looking for young Negro men
to serve on the Western frontier.
They promise to pay me thirteen dollars a month.
More money than that I never saw at once.
Surely a man can save it up
and buy a piece of land to call his own.



The army put me in a cavalry regiment,
but Lordy I never rode a horse before.
From the looks of the dirt on their britches,
neither did most of the other new recruits.
Some of them fought for the Union
in the Civil War not long past,
and have that tired look in their eyes.



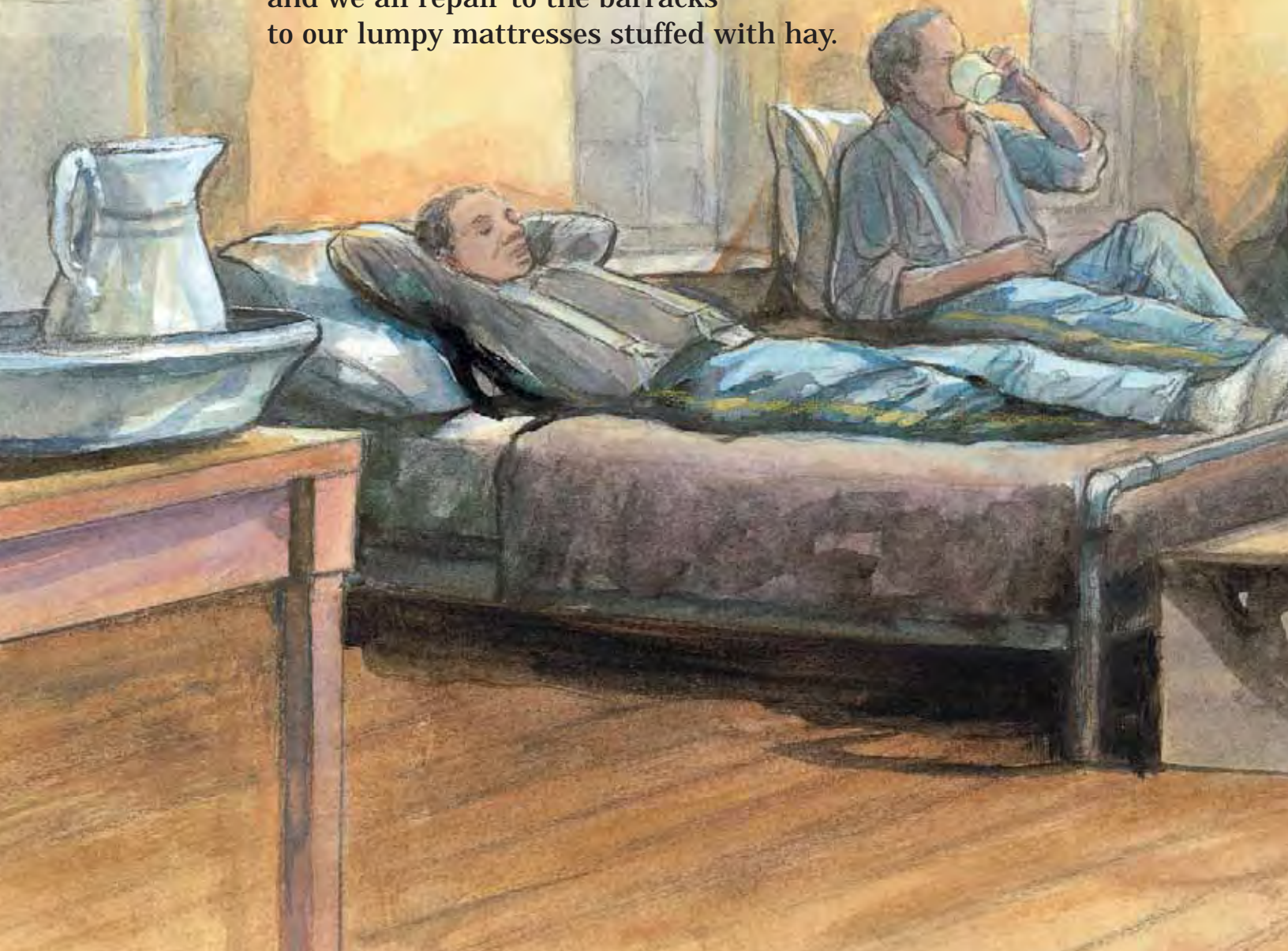
My sergeant, he's mean as a skunk
and drills us through the day.
Must be a hundred times I hear him holler,
"Troopers, you got to train harder than the rest
'cause all the nation is watching you."



A soldier lives, works, and dies by the bugle.
We get up at dawn to the sound of reveille
and muster for roll call and inspection.
Then we tend the horses.
Those animals get to eat before we do.
We got drills and more drills and work details—
cutting stones, laying bricks,
putting up new buildings everywhere.

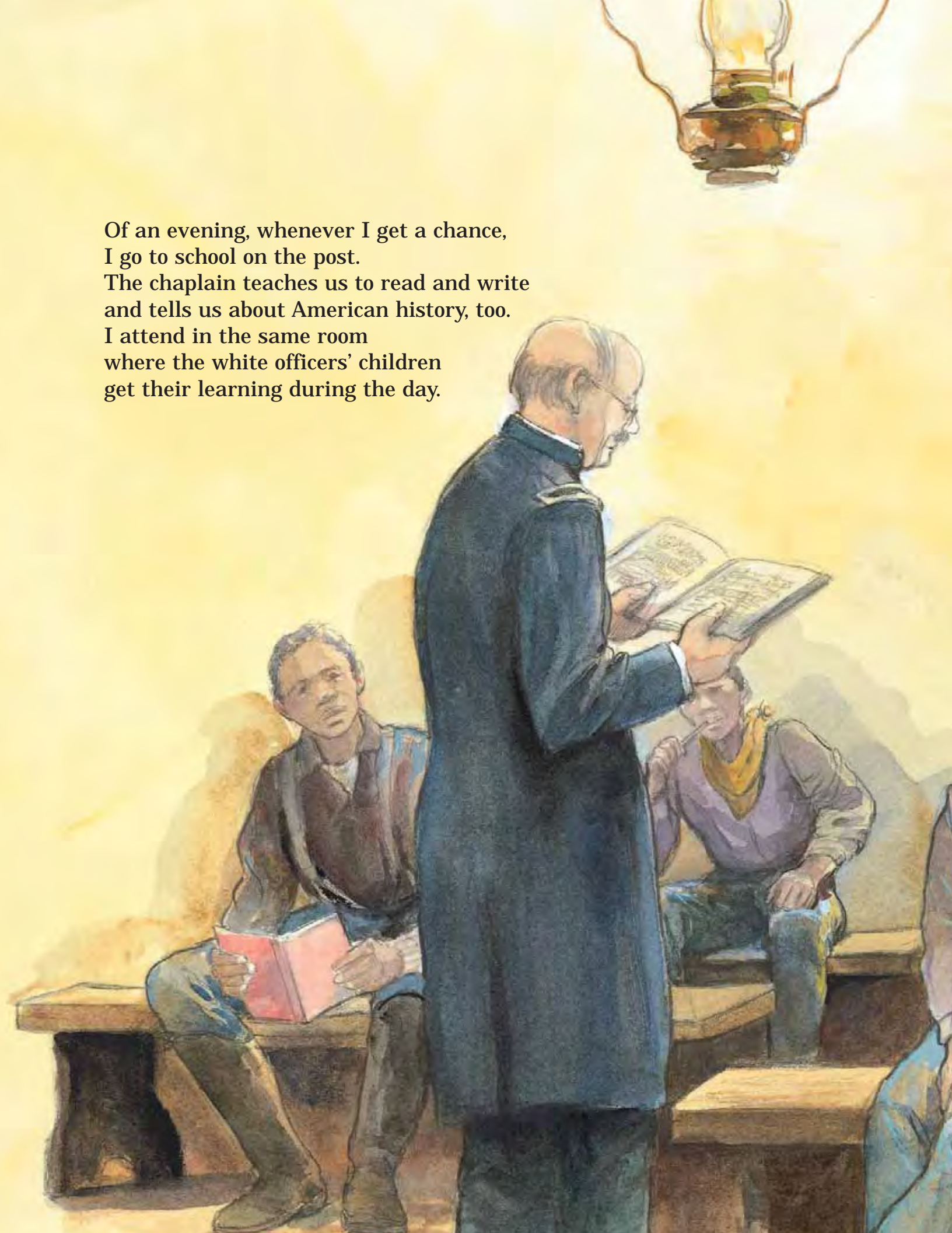
'Round five o'clock, we welcome the sound of retreat,
then round 'bout six the call to the mess hall.
It's mostly beans and pork and bread,
maybe a little beef, or a sweet roasin' ear.

We just get a little time to ourselves
before the bugle sounds tattoo
and we all repair to the barracks
to our lumpy mattresses stuffed with hay.





Of an evening, whenever I get a chance,
I go to school on the post.
The chaplain teaches us to read and write
and tells us about American history, too.
I attend in the same room
where the white officers' children
get their learning during the day.



Captain says if I learn to read and write,
maybe someday I'll get promoted to sergeant,
as far as an enlisted man can get up the line.

Just imagine what Ol' Master would say if he saw me now.
Maybe I'll write him a letter to let him know
I'm making something of myself.



Every week we escort somebody—
supply wagons full of goods, wagon trains of families
moving west to find their dreams,
or mail coaches running to El Paso.



It's a most common sight to see the soldiers racing down the road alongside a coach, horses at full gallop and guns blazing at the bandits not far behind.

