

## “Ready and Forward” - The Buffalo Soldiers of the American West Educates and Entertains Colorado Residents

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In the early morning hours of June 15th, pastel bands of tangerine and crimson stretched across the horizon of a short grass prairie twenty-five miles north of Fort Collins, Colorado. The sun was warm and welcoming, but by midday would be brutal and unforgiving with temperatures expected to reach one hundred degrees. Groups of equestrians quietly greeted each other with a handshake and a “howdy” while they saddled their horses in the south lot of Soapstone Prairie Natural Area, in anticipation for the day’s ride. Piercing the silence, a large procession of heavy horse trailers barreled up the gravel road toward the lot causing excitement in the riders. Enthusiasm swelled as this new set of equestrians emerged from their trucks and began to unload their mounts. The crisp royal blue and gold trim of their Cavalry uniforms cast a stark contrast against the soft hues of the prairie. They had traveled over ninety miles on this warm morning to educate and entertain the excited crowd who had been waiting months for a chance to ride along with re-enactors of The Buffalo Soldiers of the American West. The all-day event began with a presentation of the history of the U.S. Army’s 9th and 10th Cavalry, also known as the “Buffalo Soldiers,” with a demonstration of traditional Cavalry exercises provided by the mounted Calico Company. The opportunity to watch the Buffalo Soldiers in their true historical element, the wild grasslands of Colorado, was an intensely meaningful and tangible experience for participants of the program. “I almost cried!” exclaimed Valerie Whitcomb after the presentation, “...and the horses were so beautiful!”

### Ready and Forward

The “Buffalo Soldiers” first began traversing the plains of the American West just after the close of the Civil War. In 1866, the U.S. Congress enacted legislation that created six all-African-American Army units. One of these, the 10th Cavalry, was established in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in 1867. Nicknamed the “Buffalo Soldiers” because of their courageous character and coarse hair which resembled the American bison, the unit was comprised of soldiers from northern states, with Civil War hero Colonel Benjamin Grierson commanding. Adopting the motto “Ready and Forward,” the primary role of the newly-formed 10th Cavalry was to aid in the western expansion of the new frontier. To accomplish this task, they were responsible for facilitating the building of the infrastructure such as wagon roads, forts and telegraph lines, as well as protecting settlers and safe-guarding the crews recruited to construct the railroads in the west. They were also directed to patrol the prairie and addressing any lawlessness that occurred in the isolated pockets of early towns. The 10th Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers were stationed from as far south as Texas and Arizona to as far north as Montana. They were involved in every major post-Civil War American conflict, including the Indian Wars, the Spanish American War, the Mexican Expedition (1916-1917) and both the World Wars. The brave Buffalo Soldiers provided their last service for our country in North Africa in 1944.

It's not about the glory, it's about the story. Realizing that these unsung heroes were under-represented among historical organizations in the area, Brighton, Colorado resident John Bell organized the first Buffalo Soldier reenactment group in Colorado over three decades ago. Bell is both a son and a grandson of original 10th Cavalrymen. Using his own resources, Bell traveled 50,000 miles across the U.S., interviewing individuals who knew about the 9th and 10th Cavalry and investigating national and university archives for information. He also spent 18 months researching the proper tack and uniforms. "Everything needed to be exact, or we weren't going to do it," he states. "Our goal is to give the public as an accurate account as possible of the history of the Buffalo Soldiers, including precise dress and McClellan saddles."

Today Bell's non-profit organization, The Buffalo Soldiers of the American West, Inc., represents Company M of the 10th Cavalry, and has 25 members, of which a dozen are active reenactors. Each year the group reaches out to thousands of school children and varied audiences through their captivating performances. Bell says proudly, "This is a very special group of guys. I look at their faces before a ride, they'll be joking around, and then something transforms once they put their uniforms on, their whole demeanor changes." He adds, "This takes tremendous dedication and they are willing to make that sacrifice. They understand that it's not about the glory, it's about the story."