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Review of New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900

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New Mexico's Buffalo Soldiers, 1866-1900. By Monroe Lee Billington. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991. Illustrations, maps, preface, introduction, appendix, notes, bibliographic essay, index. 258 pp. \$29.95.

I began this book with the hope that I would learn more about the black military experience in New Mexico. Unfortunately, I did not. Perhaps had I read the bibliographic essay first, I would not have been as disappointed as I was upon concluding Mr. Billington's work. For in that essay he says: "Sources other than the official military records do not exist or are almost impossible to track down. The diaries, memoirs, and personal letters that help fill out the story of the white soldiers are essentially nonexistent for blacks. Few of the remaining entries in this bibliographical essay focus on black soldiers specifically. In reading the following pages, the reader should keep in mind that almost all of the sources mentioned are supplementary to the official records."

And that is the crux of the problem. The post returns and after action reports that form the bulk of the primary materials used to compose this work are silent on the perceptions, experiences, feelings, actions, et al. of the black troops as black men in a white society. As Lerone Bennett, Jr., made clear some years ago, black people in America have lived a different time and a different reality that cannot be understood by dependence upon materials that treat them as so many objects moved back and forth across the countryside, as so many pawns in a larger chess game rather than as real people. Consequently there is little here that helps us to construct a black world view of the black military experience in the American Southwest.

What the author has done is alternate between making summary stereotypical assertions devoid of interpretation and backed up with selected examples from post returns, and constructing a series of categories based on the experiences of white troops (in particular the Rickey volume, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars*), that he then attempts to flesh out with

whatever sketchy materials were available in the same sources. The upshot of this type of treatment is that although "more than three thousand black troopers . . . [who] served in New Mexico Territory from 1866 to 1900 made individual and collective contributions," still they come across as peripheral, shadowy figures without much substance.

I do not recommend this book for those wanting to know about the first-hand experiences of the United States Colored Troops.

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