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PRELUDE TO BROWNSVILLE

THE TWENTY-FIFTH INFANTRY AT FORT NIOBRARA, NEBRASKA, 1902-06

THOMAS R. BUECKER

Around midnight on 13 August 1906, gunshots suddenly rang out on the deserted streets of Brownsville, Texas. Unknown parties indiscriminately fired at a number of private residences, severely wounding a police officer, and into a nearby saloon, killing a bartender and slightly wounding a patron. Apparently all victims were Hispanics. When the ten-minute fusillade was over, witnesses claimed black soldiers from the Twenty-fifth Infantry stationed at adjacent Fort Brown were responsible for the outrage. Substantiation for their accusations seemingly came when civil and military

authorities discovered expended military cartridges at the scene.¹

The Brownsville citizenry had not been happy when they received word that the black Twenty-fifth was to be stationed at nearby Fort Brown and several race-related incidents had occurred between soldiers and white townspeople—Brownsville was a southern town and Jim Crow laws prevailed. After the shooting, anger against the alleged soldier assailants quickly spread across the country. Understandably, debate in the national press divided along racial lines. Although it was never proved in a military court who perpetrated the shooting, President Theodore Roosevelt ordered the First Battalion of the Twenty-fifth, the entire garrison at Fort Brown, dismissed from the United States Army. The soldiers and their supporters fought those discharges for decades to come.

Three weeks before the shooting, the soldiers, described as an “exceptionally bad lot of disgraceful ruffians,” who were accused of a “horrible atrocity . . . unparalleled for infamy,” had been transferred from a fort in Nebraska.² There they had been seen as a “peaceable, orderly, well behaved set of soldiers.”³ Closer

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examination confirms that the experience of the Twenty-fifth Infantry at Fort Niobrara stands in stark contrast to what followed at Brownsville.

SETTING THE SCENE

The Twenty-fifth Infantry was organized in 1866 as one of several regular army cavalry and infantry regiments to be composed solely of black enlisted men. The regiment served in Texas until transferred to the Department of Dakota in 1880. During the Spanish-American War it participated in the invasion of Cuba and again served overseas in the Philippine Insurrection. In 1902 the regiment was returned to the states as part of the regular rotation of overseas units.⁴

Fort Niobrara, in Cherry County in north-central Nebraska, had been established in 1880 to guard the Rosebud reservation just across the border in South Dakota. From the mid-1880s until 1898 it housed large troop components and became an impressive installation of more than seventy buildings. The nearby town of Valentine greatly benefited from the sizable military payroll and related subsistence and construction contracts.⁵

All of this changed with the Spanish-American War and subsequent Philippine Insurrection, when troops were mobilized for overseas deployment. The reduction of troops at the post, at one time down to twenty-seven men, brought corresponding financial despair to the local businesses. In 1901 another blow came when Fort Niobrara appeared on the abandonment list. As well as being deemed no longer vital to the safety of nearby communities, the old frontier posts in the interior were expensive to maintain.⁶

At the turn of the century the United States Army was in a state of flux in regard to size, function, and location of its garrisons. Even though larger and more centralized posts were being planned and built, garrisons were needed now for the large numbers of soldiers returning from the Philippines, and some of the older posts fit the bill. Regarrisoning the old posts

of Forts Robinson and Niobrara in Nebraska would bring satisfaction to the impatient local communities and their congressional delegates.⁷

By the late summer of 1902, the Twenty-fifth Infantry arrived stateside. Regimental headquarters, band, and the First and Third Battalions were assigned to Fort Niobrara. The Second Battalion went to Fort Reno, Oklahoma. Just after arriving in the states, the soldiers received the "somewhat gloomy information" that their new home would be Nebraska. Service there was a distinct departure from the Philippines, where the soldiers enjoyed life among "its free-and-easy-going native society." In the words of the regimental chaplain, Nebraska was a dreary place.⁸

BLACK SOLDIERS, WHITE TOWN

As was typical at many western duty stations on the upper Plains, the soldiers found themselves in a largely white society. By 1900 Valentine reported a population of 973, only twelve of whom were black. With hundreds of Valentine citizens at the depot to greet them, the First Battalion arrived in Valentine on 17 August 1902. Five days later the Third Battalion pulled in and marched the four and one-half miles southeast to the fort.⁹ Because the post had been largely vacant, the new garrison found it overrun with rattlesnakes. It was several weeks before the reptile occupants were cleaned out.¹⁰

In addition to an overabundance of snakes, the soldiers found other immediate disadvantages. With the companies at full strength, the barracks were overcrowded. Buildings originally built for sixty men now housed one hundred. Most soldiers resolved to adjust to the desolation and inconvenience of their new station; but others could not. In September thirteen men of the regiment deserted, by far the largest number to desert in a single month.¹¹

While the soldiers adjusted to their new situation, the local citizens sized up their new neighbors. The white community had had

experience with black soldiers before. From 1885 to 1891 companies of the Ninth Cavalry had served at Fort Niobrara, garrisoned with a larger number of white troops. This time it was a different situation, with only black soldiers comprising the garrison.

Elsewhere, when word reached a white community that black troops were to arrive, fear and anxiety quickly arose and conflict often resulted.¹² Valentine did not protest—they welcomed the Twenty-fifth Infantry. Valentine was a post town, and its citizens keenly appreciated the benefit of a large garrison. Soldiers were soldiers, and they would bring a welcome boost to the sagging local economy. Generally speaking the manifestations of overt racism on the northern frontier were far less serious than those in the south and southwest.¹³ By 1903 Chaplain Theophilus Steward, an African American, reported, “our men enjoy the very high favor of the people of the vicinity so far as I hear any expression.”¹⁴ In Valentine the townspeople realized the days of Fort Niobrara were numbered and wanted to take advantage of a large garrison regardless of race.

The bottom line for a “post town” was money from the soldiers. Understandably, the merchants’ business flourished after the monthly payday. Soldier pay brought more than twelve thousand dollars into Valentine’s economy each month. After the first payday for the Twenty-fifth, a local paper noted, “Since then they have been making business lively in town which is fully appreciated by every citizen of Valentine, reminding them of the good old days before the recent Spanish-American War.”¹⁵ Not only did soldiers spend their pay, but local building contractors received construction and repair contracts. The post absorbed thousands of dollars worth of locally procured food, grain, hay, and wood each year.

During this period of American history, race relations were at a very low point, but in many parts of the west, including Valentine, the color line had not been drawn. The black

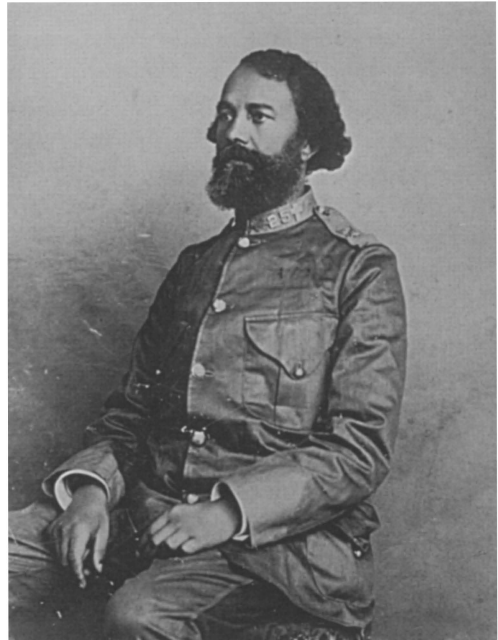


FIG. 1. Chaplain Theophilus Gould Steward, c. 1900. Photograph courtesy of Schomburg Center, New York Public Library.

regimental chaplain, Theophilus Steward, was frequently invited to deliver sermons in Valentine churches, something not generally seen in other parts of the country.¹⁶ On one occasion, arrangements were made for an “Emancipation Day” commemoration in town. Discharged soldiers confidently sought employment with local ranchers and businessmen. George Schuyler, long-time editor of the black weekly *Pittsburgh Courier*, noted, “in those few places where people treated the Black soldiers as human beings, relations were usually harmonious.”¹⁷ To the Twenty-fifth Infantry, Valentine proved the rule rather than the exception.

Much of the racial climate of a community was expressed in its local press. As in other localities, one Valentine paper tentatively

approved and yet put the soldiers on probation:

A more gentlemanly or better behaved lot of men never garrisoned Fort Niobrara than they have thus far proven themselves to be and may it be said to their credit they show a disposition to create less disturbance and noise than did many white soldiers who have been stationed here. They are evidently from the best class of their race and so long as they conduct themselves in the commendable way set out they will have the confidence and good will of our people as a whole.¹⁸

The regiment never flunked its probation at Niobrara.

Another factor for racial harmony was the closeness of an Indian population. Valentine was only seven miles south of the Rosebud Sioux reservation, and the old fears of uprising dating back to 1890 remained fresh. As late as 1904 a Valentine paper wrote that Nebraska needed its military posts "because of the Indians and the thinly populated districts adjoining."¹⁹ Frank Schubert, a historian of the black military, has pointed out that close proximity to Indian reservations was fundamental to shaping the attitudes of local whites. He identified a two-category racial system in which reservation Indians were the lower of the two categories. The townspeople would then accept Black soldiers in order to maintain that dichotomy. Schubert also noted that the "reservation may well have exerted a greater positive influence on black and white relations than American egalitarian rhetoric or the frontier itself."²⁰

The soldiers of the Twenty-fifth Infantry quickly became an accepted and valued segment of life in Valentine. The soldiers "were on the most friendly terms" with the citizens there.²¹ In Valentine there was no discrimination against the soldiers either in local businesses or in state law. As a result, soldiers at Fort Niobrara received better treatment from

whites than most were accustomed to in civilian life.²²

SOLDIER LIFE

Since Fort Niobrara was a regimental headquarters post, staff officers were assigned there. One of the most valuable and influential was Chaplain Steward, the third African-American U. S. Army chaplain, who was responsible for the moral, educational, and spiritual interests of the command. The Twenty-fifth Infantry Band provided entertainment for the local community. Besides the soldiers, the post was home to seventy-five to one hundred dependents—wives, children, and other relatives of enlisted men and officers. Other camp followers gradually joined the off-post community in and around Valentine.

The service of the infantrymen was typical for the army in peacetime—stateside garrison duty in the zone of the interior. Soldiers participated in large-scale maneuvers, which came into vogue after 1900 to give officers training in handling large bodies of men and to provide field experience for the National Guard. While the Twenty-fifth was at Fort Niobrara, department maneuvers were held at Fort Riley, Kansas. Other than this, there was little detached service away from the post. In 1903 several companies went to Fort Des Moines, Iowa, for temporary duty. In April 1906 Company A changed station to Fort Washakie, Wyoming. Part of the Wind River Reservation had been opened for settlement, and extra troops were called in to settle any unrest among the Indians there. Along with an unending routine of drill and fatigue duty, the soldiers participated in annual practice marches. These lasted a week, with field exercises in defense and reconnaissance. Other military activity included annual inspections.

Changes came with uniform and ordnance improvements. The army converted from the old blue field uniform to the more functional khaki. Early in 1906 the soldiers received the new model 1903 Springfield rifle, and a main

part of their military training was work on the target range. The regular season ran from 1 May through 31 July, with an extra month in the fall. Soldiers received preliminary small arms instruction and fired in the indoor gallery before moving on the range for company and battalion competition.²³

As was usual with soldiers in garrison duty, morale was a prime consideration. In the fall of 1902, the army was reduced in strength, resulting in the loss of nearly 250 men at the fort. Average company size dropped from ninety to sixty-five. Many men were discharged when their terms ran out, with more than three hundred leaving in 1905 alone. Large turnover frequently left "the garrison unsettled" when experienced men left.²⁴

Desertion could serve as an indicator of morale. Historically, desertion was extremely low in the black regiments compared to the white units and the desertion rate at Fort Niobrara—1.7 men per month for a garrison averaging six hundred men—was low even for black regiments. Only eighty-one soldiers deserted during the four years the regiment was at Fort Niobrara. Black soldiers found army life a good alternative to that in the civilian world.²⁵

Post morale must have been affected by new men coming into the regiment "who have not settled down into regular ways."²⁶ Recruits generally arrived at their stations with little training or discipline. Most were young men from the South who undoubtedly suffered "culture shock" when they arrived in the desolation of north-central Nebraska. The severity of winter was hard on recruits and veterans alike. As one soldier recalled, "Worst of all, the privy was outside the barracks . . . a picture of a fellow making that run at night in zero weather would be amusing indeed."²⁷

The relationship between the enlisted men and the officers of the Twenty-fifth regiment was good. Major Charles W. Penrose recalled his troops were "well drilled—I considered it [his battalion] one of the best that I have ever seen." He added, "The men were easy to disci-

pline."²⁸ Other officers favorably compared the black soldiers to any other troops they served with. Some felt the enlisted men took great pride in their officers, and apparently most enlisted men got along with the officers and actually liked them.²⁹

At this time, however, white society was growing increasingly hateful toward blacks, and white officers who commanded black soldiers bore a stigma. White officers considered service in black regiments a poor career choice.³⁰ The turnover rate of officers in the Twenty-fifth was high, and by 1906 most had served two years or less with the regiment. Many of the lieutenants were enlisted men commissioned into the regular army after the Spanish war or West Point graduates with low class rankings. The only black officer with the regiment was Chaplain Steward, who joined in 1891. Colonel Alpheus Bowman, who commanded the regiment when it arrived at Niobrara, was a Civil War veteran. Colonel Ralph W. Hoyt, who assumed command in 1904, had at that time thirty-two years service as a commissioned officer. Neither had had any previous service with black troops until he was promoted by grade into the regiment. As was typical in the old army, company officers left most of the management of their soldiers to veteran non-commissioned officers.³¹

OFF DUTY

Reports of violence committed by soldiers on leave in Valentine were no more numerous and perhaps fewer than at other post towns of the era. Soldier related intrusions and beatings involving civilians were occasionally reported. No shooting incidents involving whites were ever reported, although several shootings between blacks happened. One evening in November 1903 two quarreling soldiers started a shooting scrape, one wounding the other three times. The newspaper did comment, "three of the shots were wild and had the usual number of people been on the streets, some innocent party might have been killed."³²

Another problem arose when, after an evening on the town, soldiers "borrowed" horses from private barns and used them to return to the fort. At the post the horses were merely turned loose. But all this was relatively tame when compared to conduct of white Twelfth Cavalrymen in Crawford while that regiment was stationed at Fort Robinson.³³

Activities and entertainments for off-duty enlisted men were much the same as at other isolated western posts, although there was little official consideration given to off-duty recreation and entertainment. At the same time, there were few restrictions on how the soldiers spent their free time.

SPORTS

Athletics proved the main sanctioned off-duty diversion for the soldiers, and team sports entertained both soldiers and local spectators. There was no color line, as most competitors were white civilian teams. Baseball was by far the favorite soldier sport. Early in 1903 post athletic officers carefully selected a regimental baseball team and organized company and battalion level teams for inter-regimental and local competition. The regimental nine played civilian teams from Gordon, Valentine, Ainsworth, and other western Nebraska communities, as well as Tenth Cavalry teams from Fort Robinson. Large numbers of eager Valentine residents attended games in town, while for one contest at the fort, "Every available rig in town was brought into service to convey our townspeople to the scene of the ball game."³⁴ During the Twenty-fifth's stay at Fort Niobrara, the regimental team lost only three ball games, one to a Deadwood team and two to Gordon.³⁵

Boxing both in town and at the post was likewise popular. Regimental champions frequently met challengers from as far off as Omaha in matches before hundreds of spectators. In January 1904 the hall was packed when Hamp Ireland, champion of the Twenty-fifth, defeated John Brown of the Eleventh Infantry. White civilian boxers came from Hot

Springs to spar with soldier contenders. Before one match, the paper accurately predicted, "It is quite likely that Valentine will be deserted tonight by its male population—the attraction being a boxing contest at Fort Niobrara."³⁶

Other activities included hunting in the surrounding prairies for grouse, prairie chickens, and ducks. Soldiers occasionally played football, though it was not especially popular, particularly after the Fort Robinson eleven defeated the 1904 post team 41-0. Throughout much of the year, the training process for all enlisted men included monthly "field day" exercises. Large numbers of interested civilian spectators usually watched field day competitions in track and field and other team events as well as the drills and exercises put on by the garrison for senior inspecting officers.³⁷

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The Twenty-fifth Infantry band was an immensely popular source of entertainment for both the soldiers and Valentine citizens. During the years at Fort Niobrara, the band played in numerous concerts. One program featured the overture from "The Bohemian Girl," followed by a Caprice from the "Midway Plaisance," selections from "The Red Hussar," winding up with a medley of songs, "Salute to Erin." During summer months open air concerts were presented weekly on the post parade ground. In 1904 the band toured several towns along the railroad, where dances usually followed their concerts. For one 1903 concert, the Valentine citizenry was promised "a musical treat such as is only heard in the large cities."³⁸

In keeping with the times, soldier minstrel shows also entertained the post and local community. One show featured a farcette called "An Elephant on His Hands," songs, stump speech, dance sketch, and an encore, "Dr. Hipp, the Hypnotist." Late in 1903 a group of soldiers presented vaudeville shows in town featuring "Edison's Exhibition Kinetoscope." Also that year the garrison furnished a

quartette for joint G. A. R. Memorial Day observances. And in the winter of 1905 the Fort Niobrara Minstrels gave a benefit performance at the county courthouse for the rectory fund of St. John's Church.³⁹

At Fort Niobrara the black enlisted men had at least some opportunity for educational and spiritual enrichment. Chaplain Steward conducted day school for the children and enlisted men's school in afternoons and evenings. By December 1902 his soldier school had seventy students, instructed by four assistant teachers. At least once a week Steward lectured on U. S. history and civil government. Although educational work took time away from his chaplaincy duties, he found "the interest manifested by the enlisted men in the main is good."⁴⁰

Throughout his tour at Fort Niobrara, Steward worked constantly to fill his combination chapel-school house. He was "convinced that our religious work contributes an important share to the contentment of the garrison."⁴¹ During the first years in Nebraska, the soldiers supported a YMCA group that had been organized in the Philippines and received traveling libraries from the YMCA international committee.

THE SPORTING LIFE

Off-reservation entertainments also proved identical to those at other western posts. Lax law enforcement that tacitly acknowledged worldly desires led to the "happy go easy way" familiar to post town morality and not restricted by the color line. Soldiers frequented local saloons where they drank alongside white patrons with no objection. Blacks were also freely served in eating places and patronized local stores and businesses. Soldiers remarked on how well they were treated by the white population whenever they came into town.⁴²

Nevertheless, the soldiers operated in white surroundings; while in town they were expected to keep in line. Shortly after the regiment arrived in Valentine, Colonel Bowman issued a circular that complimented the sol-

diers' conduct yet warned: "It rests with the enlisted soldiers of the regiment to proudly maintain their well-earned reputation for gallantry in their sober, self-respecting, manly conduct among our Nebraska friends."⁴³

Not all their needs could be met within the city limits. Enterprising individuals opened up several "resorts" or "sporting houses" that catered to the black soldiers. These resorts were located outside town along the Niobrara River between one and one-half and four miles from the post. By 1903 Charlie Price's, Harris House, and Stratton & Kline flourished as combination bar-gambling-dance hall-brothel operations.

The river resorts mushroomed because the black soldiers needed places where they could gather and socialize freely away from the predominately white society. Operated by blacks, some of whom were discharged soldiers, the resorts were located close to the fort, actually within the military reservation, on land homesteaded before the reservation was declared. Besides liquor, gambling, "vile picture machines," and female companionship were readily available. The soldiers often referred to the resorts as "Hooks" and the soldier patrons as "Hookers." One veteran recalled "there were some habitues of the 'dives' who would brave the bleak cold and drifting snow to have their nightly whirl with the denizens in their abodes of debauchery."⁴⁴

Resort operations openly sold liquor without proper licenses. Some local citizens protested that although the "hooks" were outside the city, they were still under county jurisdiction, but the "hooks" continued their profitable operation. Between 1902 and 1906, however, fifteen of the twenty-one incidents of serious violence involving soldiers that occurred, originated at the resorts. Eleven of the incidents involved shooting injuries, including four deaths. Petty bickering, jealousy over female affection, and inter-regimental bad blood appear to have been the main causes. By 1906 nearly all county court prosecutions grew out of crimes originating at the resorts.⁴⁵

Prostitution, both at the resorts and in houses in town, was another vice available to soldiers. In Valentine "Auntie" Deliah Cole ran a popular boarding house used by local prostitutes, and by 1905 four or five similar houses were operating in the Valentine vicinity. At the post hospital, the number of cases of venereal disease treated monthly grew threefold to sixteen by the fall of 1905.⁴⁶

For those short of funds for gambling, women, or liquor, Private John Hollomon was the "financial man." He loaned money at twenty-five percent per month and arranged credit for soldiers with saloon owners and merchants in town. He was captain of the regimental baseball team, and his henchmen, known as the "dirty dozen," rounded out the team.⁴⁷

CLEANING UP THE JOINTS

Immorality was continually under fire from both the post and the town. In December 1902 Chaplain Steward reported that he had been able to shut down "a miserable den of vice." He lamented the "disreputable houses" well-advertised in the post and the many "bad women domiciled" near the post who were "wielding a very strong influence." In 1903 leading citizens unsuccessfully attempted to close down gambling houses in Valentine.⁴⁸

On 29 October 1904, a serious shooting incident shocked the state. Unknown parties fired shots into a group standing in front of Stratton's resort, hitting Lulu "Red Top" Johnson, a female employee, and two male civilians. Johnson died the next day. Soldiers were immediately blamed when witnesses claimed two men with rifles had been seen heading to the fort just after the shooting and a number of fired military cartridges were found where the shots seemed to have originated. The governor of Nebraska quickly offered a two hundred dollar reward for information, but a conspiracy of silence—foreshadowing future events—seems to have ruled among the soldiers. Although a political leader claimed that "numbers of the enlisted men might have

full knowledge of men and motive," no guilty parties were ever identified.⁴⁹

The wide-open lifestyle readily available to Fort Niobrara soldiers led to calls for reform. Early in the spring of 1904 the Valentine city council ordered the saloons in Valentine to remove all gambling machines and devices. By 1905 the council ordered the local saloons, which had an income of sixty thousand dollars a year, to close at midnight every night and stay closed all day Sunday. Naturally, this drove business to the resorts.⁵⁰ In the same year the town cracked down on prostitution. Deliah Cole was arrested and charged with renting rooms for lewd purposes and harboring prostitutes. After subsequent raids on her place a local paper carefully pointed out, "such places will be prosecuted regardless of color." Its editor urged more action: "Our town has too long been run a 'happy go easy way' to the detriment of every citizen of good intent."⁵¹

In the winter of 1905-06, Colonel Hoyt and county officials (strongly supported by Chaplain Steward) confronted the river resorts. Prostitution trials in town divulged that when gambling in town shut down, Valentine saloon owners sent their machines and paraphernalia to the resorts. W. P. Westover, the district judge from Rushville, quickly ordered the sheriff to raid the river resorts and seize all gambling devices. According to the *Valentine Republican*, "The blow almost took the breath away from interested parties in town."⁵²

The raids were generally successful, but apparently Charlie Price had advance warning; nothing related to gambling activity was found at his place. (Price of course claimed nothing was found because no gambling went on). Shortly afterward, Stratton's place mysteriously burned to the ground. County officials had instructed the county attorney to "prosecute these keepers until houses of such character are closed up and done away with." Illegal liquor sales also drew prosecutions. In March 1906 the three principal resort operators were each fined five hundred dollars and costs for selling liquor without license.⁵³ Steward noted the favorable effects of prosecuting

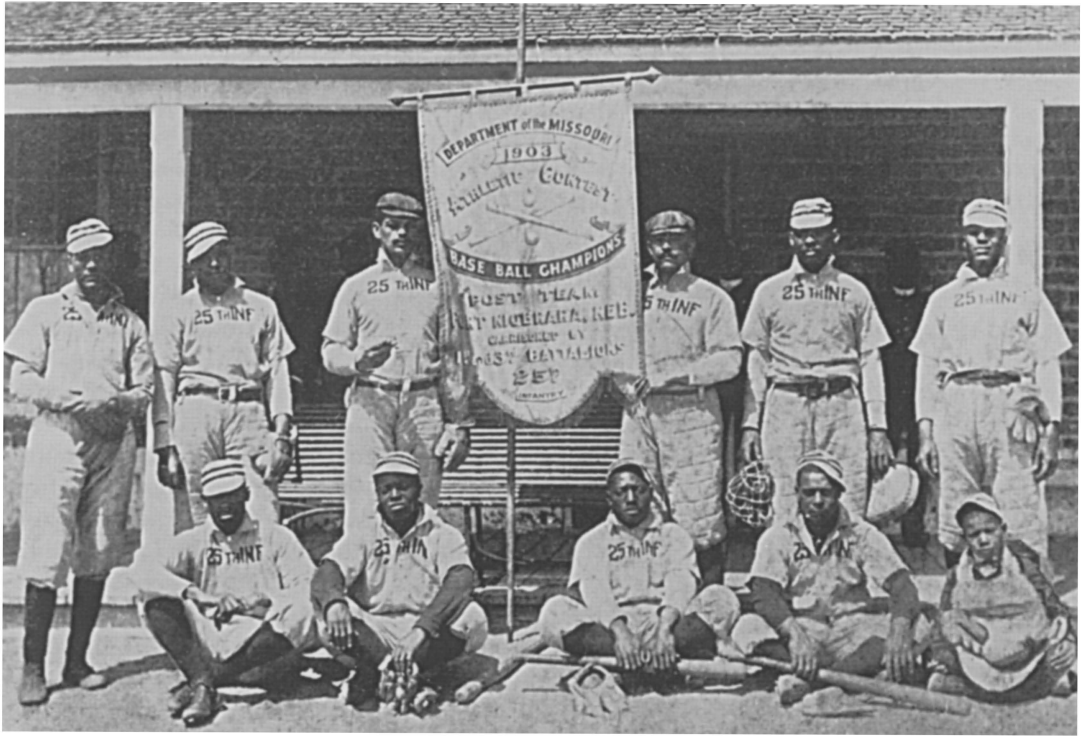


FIG. 2. The Twenty-fifth Infantry baseball team, champions of the 1903 Fort Riley maneuvers. Photograph courtesy of Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

the resorts, citing an increase in church attendance by the enlisted men and also “a change on the part of the wives of the soldiers.”⁵⁴

Resort business slowed but did not stop. In the spring of 1906, soldier rows continued at Charlie Price’s, and in mid-May two soldiers were seriously wounded in a dispute at a unidentified resort south of town. One benefit of the crackdown on the resorts and local whorehouses was noted by the post surgeon, however, who reported “a diminution of venereal disease.”⁵⁵

MANEUVERS

As usual the soldiers participated in the large maneuvers held in October 1903 at Fort Riley. The Fort Niobrara battalions marched overland to Norfolk, Nebraska, then took the train

south to Fort Riley. All along the march, they played baseball games prearranged with local teams. For several weeks, the Twenty-fifth joined some ten thousand regular soldiers, guardsmen, and militia for training. Of the maneuvers, one soldier later recalled:

... we went through a month of strenuous field maneuvering, marching, and counter marching—covering a wide area—sometimes the attacking forces, sometimes the defending forces, but I was never able to determine when we had won or lost, and I don’t believe that many of the enlisted men ever were any wiser than me.⁵⁶

The crowning achievement of Fort Niobrara baseball came during an inter-departmental baseball championship series at the close of

the maneuvers. The Tenth Cavalry team from Fort Robinson was the favorite, but the Niobrara soldiers played their way to the finals, even defeating the Second Battalion team from Fort Reno. In the championship game, the Niobrara team battled the Robinson cavalymen for ten innings before winning 3-2.⁵⁷

A NASTY INCIDENT

The maneuvers, however, also brought an ominous harbinger of things to come. The Twenty-fifth Infantry was camped next to a regiment of Texas militia. The Texans first started some trouble with the Tenth Cavalrymen then directed their animosity toward the black infantrymen, hissing, jeering, and openly insulting soldiers and officers of the Twenty-fifth. The constant barrage of racial epithets from the southerners led to several altercations between the two regiment's enlisted ranks. To the Texans, coming from a southern state, "a colored man in uniform represents authority, and this idea suggests superiority, which is bitterly resented."⁵⁸ The encampment broke up, and the units returned home, but the incidents with the Texas soldiers were the beginnings of a legacy of racial problems with Texans for the Fort Niobrara soldiers.

Although the War Department had announced in 1904 that Fort Niobrara was to be abandoned, the post remained in use for a few more years. Valentine residents faced the loss of a large source of revenue, but not all mourned their loss. The *Valentine Democrat* stated, "There may be some consolation for those who derive no benefit from the soldiers . . . and looked on the prevalence of soldiers as a menace to the peace and quietude of the home."⁵⁹

GOING TO TEXAS

Formal orders closing Fort Niobrara came in May 1906. By this time many soldiers were ready for a new station; some were jubilant over the news. With deteriorating living quar-

ters, an isolated location, and crackdowns on their off-duty social outlets, the black soldiers were ready to leave Nebraska, regardless of the fair treatment they had received from nearby whites. One soldier recalled, "I was glad to get away from Fort Niobrara, we had been staying there so long, I was glad to get to any old place."⁶⁰

The Twenty-fifth was not unaware that there were potential problems with their transfer to forts in Texas, however. A Nebraskan advised one soldier, "Well, you are glad to leave us now, but you won't be treated so well in Texas as we do here." Another soldier heard, "They will give you a warm reception down there." Many brushed off or ignored any fears. When questioned by a white associate, one soldier replied, "Well, we can give them as good as they send." Recalling the 1903 incidents, Chaplain Steward openly stated in one Sunday service that the people in Texas did not want black soldiers stationed there.⁶¹ Such talk continued until the troops departed.

New stations for the Fort Niobrara garrison placed the First Battalion at Fort Brown, at Brownsville, and the Third Battalion at Fort McIntosh; regimental headquarters staff and the band were assigned to Fort Bliss. Both battalions were to stop at Camp Mabry, near Houston, to participate in maneuvers with Texas state troops before moving to their new stations.

Rumors quickly broke out that the Texans intended to use live cartridges against the black soldiers during the maneuvers. As a result, Colonel Hoyt strongly protested sending his soldiers to Camp Mabry, and many of his officers predicted that violence would break out between the soldiers and Texas militia. Chaplain Steward feared that Texas would be a quasi-battleground for the Twenty-fifth. Plans to deploy the men to Camp Mabry were dropped, but one company commander warned that, "In my opinion the sentiment in Texas is so hostile against colored troops that there is always danger of serious trouble between the citizens and soldiers whenever they are brought in contact."⁶²

Although the maneuver idea was scrapped, the army remained firm in its decision to move the regiment to Texas. At 7:30 p.m. on 23 July 1906, the troops marched out of Fort Niobrara for the last time. At the Valentine depot, the soldiers had to wait for several hours for the train south while hundreds of Valentine citizens gathered to see them off. At midnight the Twenty-fifth Infantry boarded several special trains and left Nebraska. Exactly three weeks later came the infamous Brownsville shooting.

The peaceful coexistence of black soldiers and local Valentine whites sharply contrasts with the racial atmosphere faced by the soldiers in Texas. The racial climate differed for several reasons, including the close proximity of a large Indian population. But the most likely reason for the harmony was economic. The money generated by Fort Niobrara was vitally important to Valentine. As a consequence, the soldiers were treated with respect—even if that respect had to be purchased—and their presence was largely appreciated by the local white population. For a brief period, the Twenty-fifth Infantry was an accepted, valued segment of the community. Here was one case of cooperation and harmony rarely found in a deteriorating racial climate for African-American civilians and soldiers.

NOTES

1. For more on the Brownsville raid, see Marvin Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the U.S. Army 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), Ann J. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair-National Crisis and Black Reaction* (Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), and John D. Weaver, *The Brownsville Raid* (New York: Norton & Co., 1970).

2. *Summary Discharge or Mustering out of Regiments or Companies*. Senate Document 402, part 1, 60th Congress, 1st Session, 1907-1908, p. 238; John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright, 1971), p. 480.

3. *The Brownsville Affray—Orders and Messages of the President, Etc.*. Senate Document 389, 60th Congress, 1st Session, 1907-1908, p. 33.

4. All information on the organization and service of the Twenty-fifth Infantry is from Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West 1869-1891*

(Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1971), and John Nankivell, *History of the Twenty-fifth Regiment, U. S. Infantry* (1927; rpt. Fort Collins: Old Army Press, 1972).

5. For more on Fort Niobrara, see Thomas R. Buecker, "Fort Niobrara, 1880-1906: Guardian of the Rosebud Sioux," *Nebraska History* 65 (Fall 1984): 301-25.

6. *Crawford Tribune*, 28 June 1901.

7. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier* (note 1 above), p. 28; *Valentine Democrat*, 5 September 1901.

8. Richard Johnson, "My Life in the U. S. Army, 1899-1922," typescript, U. S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, pp. 67-68, 73; Theophilus Steward, *Fifty Years in the Gospel Ministry* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1921), p. 354.

9. *Valentine Republican*, 29 August 1902. All information on 25th Infantry troop movements and assignments at Fort Niobrara is compiled from "Post Returns, Fort Niobrara, September 1902-September 1906," RG 393, Records of U. S. Army Continental Commands, National Archives.

10. Steward, *Fifty Years* (note 8 above), p. 354.

11. Post Returns (note 9 above), Fort Niobrara, September 1902.

12. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier* (note 1 above), p. 109.

13. Frank N. Schubert, "Black Soldiers on the White Frontier: Some Factors Influencing Race Relations," *Phylon* 32 (Winter 1971): 410, 415.

14. "Monthly Reports of Chaplains, Fort Niobrara, September 1902-June 1906," January 1903, RG 393 National Archives.

15. *Valentine Republican*, 19 September 1902.

16. William Seraile, "Saving Souls on the Frontier, A Chaplain's Labor," *Montana* 42 (Winter 1992): 41; Steward, *Fifty Years* (note 8 above), p. 356.

17. George Schuyler, *Black and Conservative: The Autobiography of George Schuyler* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1966), p. 118.

18. *Valentine Republican*, 19 September 1902.

19. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier* (note 1 above), p. 25; *Valentine Democrat*, 22 September 1904.

20. Schubert, "Black Soldiers" (note 13 above), pp. 414-15.

21. *Summary Discharge* (note 2 above), pp. 209-10.

22. *Proceedings of a General Court-Martial Convened at Headquarters, Department of Texas, San Antonio, February 4, 1907, in the Case of Maj. Charles W. Penrose, Twenty-fifth United States Infantry*. Senate Document 402, part 2, 60th Congress, 1st Session, 1907-1908, p. 795.

23. *Report of the Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry Relative to the Shooting Affray at Brownsville, Texas, August 13-14, 1906 by Soldiers of Companies*

B, C, and D, *Twenty-fifth United States Infantry*. Senate Document 701, 61st Congress, 3rd Session, 1910-1911, pp. 1345-46.

24. *Valentine Democrat*, 4 December 1902; Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), March 1905.

25. "Post Returns, Fort Niobrara, September 1902-June 1906," Record Group 393, Records of Continental Commands, National Archives.

26. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), June 1905.

27. Johnson, "My Life in the U. S. Army" (note 8 above), p. 71.

28. *Orders and Messages* (note 3 above), p. 32.

29. *Hearings Before the Committee on Military Affairs Concerning the Affray at Brownsville, Texas, on the Night of August 13 and 14, 1906*. Senate Document 402, 60th Congress, 1st Session, 1907-1908, p. 3191; *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), p. 751.

30. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier* (note 1 above), p. 84.

31. *Hearings Before Committee* (note 29 above), p. 3190.

32. *Valentine Democrat*, 26 November 1903.

33. *Valentine Republican*, 11 December 1903. Information on Twelfth Cavalry violence is found in the "Newspaper Articles 1910-1918" file at Fort Robinson Museum.

34. *Valentine Democrat*, 11 September 1902.

35. Nankivell, *History of the Twenty-fifth Regiment* (note 4 above), p. 168.

36. *Valentine Republican*, 22 January, 19 February 1904.

37. Steward, *Fifty Years* (note 8 above), p. 358; *Valentine Democrat*, 4 December 1904; 11 June 1903.

38. *Valentine Democrat*, 1 January, 5 March 1903.

39. *Valentine Democrat*, 26 March 1903, 23 November 1905; Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), May 1903; *Valentine Democrat*, 9 February 1905.

40. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), November 1905; December 1902; November 1904.

41. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), November 1904; October 1902; July 1903.

42. *Proceedings of a GCM* (note 22 above), pp. 723, 858; *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), p. 473.

43. Nankivell, *History of the Twenty-fifth Regiment* (note 4 above), p. 115.

44. Johnson, "My Life in the U. S. Army" (note 8 above), pp. 68, 73; *Valentine Democrat*, 30 November 1905.

45. All information on violent incidents is compiled from articles in the *Valentine Democrat* and *Republican* between 1902 and 1906; *Valentine Republican*, 12 January 1906.

46. "Medical History of Fort Niobrara, August 1902-July 1906," October, November 1905, RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives.

47. Lane, *The Brownsville Affair* (note 1 above), p. 60; *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), pp. 406-07.

48. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), December 1902, June 1904.

49. *Summary Discharge* (note 2 above), pp. 361-65; *Valentine Democrat*, 3 November 1904; C.H. Cornell, Chairman Republican Congressional Committee, Sixth District, cited in *Summary Discharge*, p. 363.

50. *Valentine Democrat*, 28 April 1904, 14 December 1905.

51. *Valentine Democrat*, 23 March 1905.

52. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), January 1906; *Valentine Democrat*, 30 November, 7 December; *Valentine Republican*, 1 December 1905.

53. *Valentine Democrat*, 11 January (quoted), 15 March 1906; *Valentine Republican*, 9 March 1906.

54. Chaplain Reports (note 14 above), January 1906.

55. Medical History (note 46 above), January 1906.

56. Johnson, "My Life in the U. S. Army" (note 8 above), p. 76.

57. Nankivell, *History of the Twenty-fifth Regiment* (note 4 above), pp. 167-68.

58. *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), pp. 1665-68; Carroll, *The Black Military Experience* (note 2 above), p. 525 (quoted).

59. *Valentine Democrat*, 18 February 1904; Medical History (note 46 above), June 1904; *Hearings Before Committee* (note 29 above), p. 1107; *Valentine Democrat*, 5 April 1906.

60. *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), p. 884.

61. *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), p. 387; Weaver, *The Brownsville Raid* (note 1 above), p. 236; Steward cited in *Report of Proceedings*, p. 767.

62. *Report of Proceedings* (note 23 above), pp. 1390-91; protests from 25th Officers found on pp. 1665-68; objection of Chaplain Steward, p. 1475; Lane, *The Brownsville Affair* (note 1 above), p. 13.