



The Buffalo Soldier Tragedy of 1877 (Canseco-Keck History Series)

Paul H. Carlson

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In the middle of the arid summer of 1877, a drought year in West Texas, a troop of some forty buffalo soldiers (African American cavalry led by white officers) struck out into the Llano Estacado from Double Lakes, south of modern Lubbock, pursuing a band of Kwahada Comanches who had been raiding homesteads and hunting parties. A group of twenty-two buffalo hunters accompanied the soldiers as guides and allies.

Several days later three black soldiers rode into Fort Concho at modern San Angelo and reported that the men and officers of Troop A were missing and presumed dead from thirst. The “Staked Plains Horror,” as the *Galveston Daily News* called it, quickly captured national attention. Although most of the soldiers eventually straggled back into camp, four had died, and others eventually faced court-martial for desertion. The buffalo hunters had ridden off on their own to find water, and the surviving soldiers had lived by drinking the blood of their dead horses and their own urine. A routine army scout had turned into disaster of the worst kind.

Although the failed expedition was widely reported at the time, its sparse treatments since then have relied exclusively on the white officers’ accounts. Paul Carlson has mined the courts-martial records for testimony of the enlisted men, memories of a white boy who rode with the Indians, and other buried sources to provide the first multifaceted narrative ever published. His gripping account provides not only a fuller version of what happened over those grim eighty-six hours but also a nuanced view of the interaction of soldiers, hunters, settlers, and Indians on the Staked Plains at this poignant moment before the final settling of the Comanches on their reservation in Indian Territory.

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