

PEDALING ON THE PERIPHERY:
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN TWENTY-FIFTH
INFANTRY BICYCLE CORPS AND
THE ROADS OF AMERICAN EXPANSION

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In the late 1890s, African American infantrymen stationed in Montana tested the bicycle for its military utility through a series of extended trips. Representations of the bicycle corps in photographs, newspapers, and Army reports demonstrate the differences and similarities in race relations between the new western states and the East.

IN THE SPRING OF 1896, the U.S. Army reticently approved an infantry lieutenant's request to experiment with bicycles for military use. Unlike horses—so the logic went—bicycles did not require food, rest, or considerable maintenance. Bikes had gained rapid popularity with civilians, and European armies were already experimenting with this potential improvement.¹ The pilot project was the brainchild of Lieutenant James Moss, a white southerner whose graduation at the bottom of his class at West Point earned him a post on the geographical periphery. For a decade, he was stationed in Missoula, Montana, with several companies of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division, one of four black regiments in the postbellum Army. A revolving group of these regulars were picked from many hopefuls to become the bicycle corps. After several training rides in western Montana in 1896, twenty bicycle soldiers cycled

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¹ General Nelson Miles, Division of the Missouri, had been interested in testing the bicycle for military use for several years, but all previous experiments were much smaller in scale. Charles M. Dollar, "Putting the Army on Wheels: The Story of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Bicycle Corps," in *Buffalo Soldiers in the West: A Black Soldiers Anthology*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles (College Station, 2007), 242–56.

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1,900 miles to St. Louis, Missouri, in the summer of 1897.² Three white men, Lieutenant Moss, Army surgeon J. M. Kennedy, and *Daily Missoulian* reporter Edward Boos, joined the regulars for the entire trip. The experiment demonstrated the bicycle's utility as a horse replacement, yet the changing nature of warfare quickly rendered these findings moot. Those soldiers who remained enlisted and survived the Spanish-American War were transferred to Texas in 1906, where all 167 troops were "discharged without honor" by President Theodore Roosevelt after what became known as the Brownsville affray.³ All were denied reenlistment or pensions despite numerous appeals.⁴

The Brownsville incident is justifiably regarded as a milestone in national history, yet the bicycle corps also illuminates the troubled history of the racial politics of national expansion. I argue that the bicycle corps' journey is important not because it tested bicycles. Rather, the very marginality of the enterprise allows an approach to this historical moment that sidesteps teleological interpretations of the forces that shaped the new western states into a part of the United States.

While the bicycle soldiers and their cross-country trip are popular topics in Montana's "colorful" history, they are absent from academic scholarship.⁵ The soldiers are mentioned only briefly in African American histories of the West and are altogether ignored in the larger context of the historiography of the nation.⁶ I argue that attention

² The roster of men in the bicycle corps changed with every practice exercise. Five soldiers (Elwood Forman, William Haynes, John Findley, Frank Johnson, and William Proctor) participated in the expeditions to Yellowstone National Park and St. Louis.

³ Irene Schubert and Frank N. Schubert, eds., *On the Trail of the Buffalo Soldier II: New and Revised Biographies of African Americans in the U.S. Army, 1866–1917* (Lanham, MD, 2004). Elwood Forman died in the Philippines, and Eugene Jones was wounded in Cuba in 1898. William Brown, Mingo Sanders, and John Cook were discharged without honor after Brownsville.

⁴ On Brownsville, see Garna L. Christian, *Black Soldiers in Jim Crow Texas, 1899–1917* (College Station, 1995); James N. Leiker, *Racial Borders: Black Soldiers along the Rio Grande* (College Station, 2002); James A. Tinsley, "Roosevelt, Foraker, and the Brownsville Affray," *Journal of Negro History* 41 (January 1956): 43–65; and Lewis N. Wynne, "Brownsville: The Reaction of the Negro Press," *Phylon* 33, no. 2 (1972): 153–60. Racial tensions were high as soon as the soldiers arrived, as white and Mexican residents of Brownsville vociferously opposed the presence of black troops. On the night of 13 August 1906, a bartender was fatally shot by an unidentified assailant. Even though all soldiers were in their barracks at Fort Brown, the townspeople blamed the Twenty-fifth Infantry soldiers for the death.

⁵ Linda C. Bailey and Darla Bruner-Wilson, *Fort Missoula's Military Cyclists: The Story of the 25th U.S. Infantry Bicycle Corps* (Missoula, 1997); Gus Chambers, *The Bicycle Corps: America's Black Army on Wheels*, VHS, (Missoula: PBS Home Video, 2000); and George Niels Sorensen, *Iron Riders: Story of the 1890s Fort Missoula Buffalo Soldiers Bicycle Corps* (Missoula, 2000).

⁶ Sherry L. Smith, "Lost Soldiers: Re-searching the Army in the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (Summer 1998): 149–63. Smith makes the point that scholarship on the western United States spends little time on the peacetime activities of the Army. African American military history mentions the bicycle soldiers briefly, if at all. See Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardaway, eds., *African Americans on the Western Frontier* (Niwot, CO, 1998); John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York, 1971);

to the bicycle corps forges connections between the usually separate historiographies of post-Reconstruction African American history and the concurrent process of the inclusion of the western territories into the United States.⁷

Through a reading of newspaper articles, Army reports, and photographs, this essay argues that the bicycle corps' marked status as black inscribed eastern and southern hierarchies of race into landscapes of continuing white-Indian conflict. At the same time, the very existence of a black bicycle corps, as well as their reception by silver mine owners, Native Americans, European immigrants, and white Montanans, points to the concrete and consequential differences in racial politics between the Far West and the East. The bicycle soldiers' experiment is also distinguished by their simple act of movement across different places. The obvious mobility of the corps guaranteed that they were understood, and saw themselves, as temporary presences along their route. Through attention to the soldiers' movement across different places, and their reception along the way, this paper departs from the focus on settlement in other studies of the African American West.⁸ I suggest that the bicycle soldiers are vehicles for seeing how racial formations in the new states were shaped by their process of Americanization. Crucially, this occurred not just in an undifferentiated "West" but in geographically specific contexts. The black soldiers' roles were different, and they were perceived differently, whether they were breaking up mine strikes, bicycling through an Indian reservation, or visiting a national park. (See Figure 1.)

By the 1880s, the peacetime Army enlisted only twenty-five thousand men, many of whom were posted to far-flung forts. Black soldiers were most likely to be stationed in remote areas, whereas white regiments could expect to be rotated to more populated regions. Quintard Taylor notes that this was official policy: "The War Department

William A. Dobak and Thomas D. Phillips, *The Black Regulars, 1866–1898* (Norman, 2001); Arlen L. Fowler, *The Black Infantry in the West, 1869–1891* (Norman, 1996); William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States*, rev. ed. (New York, 1996); Charles L. Kenner, *Buffalo Soldiers and Officers of the Ninth Cavalry, 1867–1898: Black & White Together* (Norman, 1999); John P. Langellier, *Men a-Marching: The African American Soldier in the West, 1866–1896* (Springfield, PA, 1995); William H. Leckie and Shirley A. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers: A Narrative of the Black Cavalry in the West*, rev. ed. (Norman, 2003); Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Negro on the American Frontier* (New York, 1971); W. Sherman Savage, *Blacks in the West* (Westport, CT, 1976); Frank N. Schubert, *Black Valor: Buffalo Soldiers and the Medal of Honor, 1870–1898* (Wilmington, DE, 1997); Frank N. Schubert, ed., *Voices of the Buffalo Soldier: Records, Reports, and Recollections of Military Life and Service in the West* (Albuquerque, 2003); and Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528–1990* (New York, 1998).

⁷ For an exception to the common separation of postbellum black history and westward expansion, see Christian McMillen, "Border State Terror and the Genesis of the African-American Community in Deer Lodge and Choteau Counties, Montana, 1870–1890," *Journal of Negro History* 79 (Spring 1994): 212–47.

⁸ For a superb analysis and condemnation of segregation in Montana, see J. W. Smurr, "Jim Crow Out West," in *Historical Essays on Montana and the Northwest*, ed. J. W. Smurr and K. Ross Toole (Helena, 1957), 149–223.



Figure 1. Bicycle corps at Fort Missoula, date and photographer unknown. Photo courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana–Missoula.

rationalized that decision by arguing that their presence in eastern states and particularly in the South would prompt racial violence.⁹ The Twenty-fifth Infantry had served in Texas, Oklahoma, and Dakota Territory prior to their tenure at Forts Keogh, Custer, and Missoula in Montana.¹⁰ Several regiments of the Twenty-fifth were present as reserve soldiers at Wounded Knee in 1890, and they continued to put down Native “rebellions” throughout their decade in Missoula.

Black soldiers in the West were also engaged in nation-building efforts of a different sort. By physically building the infrastructures that materially connected the West to the eastern states, such as roads and telegraph lines, and by forcefully putting down labor rebellions, African American soldiers shaped the former territories into *bona fide* states. The fact that black troops were deployed to perform these tasks in Montana and Idaho is illuminating. Black-white racial politics were at the heart of the concrete, physical practices and processes of post-Reconstruction American expansion. The dull, backbreaking labor of grading roads and digging postholes was deemed appropriate work for black men, not white soldiers, and the well-known racism of white mine workers diminished the possibility of solidarity between black union-busting troops and white

⁹ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 165.

¹⁰ John H. Nankivell, *Buffalo Soldier Regiment: History of the Twenty-Fifth United States Infantry, 1869–1926* (Lincoln, 2001).

workers. The soldiers, of course, had followed their own reasons into the military. The most compelling for many was that the Army promised them the best pay and safest employment in the post-Reconstruction era.¹¹ Consequently, in body, if not always in spirit, the enlisted black men furthered the interests of the U.S. government on the frontier of the emerging nation.

And yet the Far West was evidently not far enough, as the national lynching epidemic claimed two soldiers of the Twenty-fifth. While stationed at Fort Meade, South Dakota, in 1885, Corporal Hallon (his first name is unknown) was arrested "on circumstantial evidence" for the shooting of a white lawyer, "supposedly out of jealousy over a woman." A mob broke into the Sturgis jail and lynched Hallon. Three years later, in Fort Shaw, Montana, Private Robert Robinson was lynched by a white mob that dragged him from jail after he was accused of shooting a white man whom he had found with his girlfriend. The application of this script (accusation of violence over a woman—jail—vigilante jailbreak—hanging) illustrates an American practice at its height in the late nineteenth century, exported unchanged to the territories.¹² Indeed, the warden who handed over the jail keys to the lynch mob in Fort Shaw was none other than the commanding officer of the entire regiment.¹³ The infantrymen's retaliation for Hallon's lynching in South Dakota, in contrast, in which they marched into Sturgis and opened fire into a saloon, was a distinctively western scenario.

Yet whites in this region often put their racism on the back burner when it did not serve their immediate needs. When black soldiers were deployed to defend mining companies against striking workers, the owners' economic interests temporarily trumped their objections to black troops. Silver miners in northern Idaho went on strike in 1892, and the Coeur d'Alene region was placed under martial law for four months. Twenty-fifth Infantry soldiers dispatched from Missoula were the first federal troops to be called in to "prevent property damage" and arrest union sympathizers. Mine owners and strikebreakers welcomed the troops, and set them up in tents in the center of the town of Wallace, although they received a "frosty reception from the citizens of Mullan."¹⁴ The utilitarianism that fed such acceptance went surprisingly far, farther than may have been possible elsewhere. Off-duty soldiers were invited to baseball games and dances and entertained the towns with "gospel hymns far into the night."¹⁵

¹¹ Carroll, *Black Military Experience* and Fowler, *Black Infantry*.

¹² See Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York, 2002); Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago, 1970); and Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York, 1998), see especially, "Deadly Amusements: Spectacle Lynchings and the Contradictions of Segregation as Culture," 199–239.

¹³ Fowler, *Black Infantry*, 58–62, 134.

¹⁴ Robert Wayne Smith, *The Coeur d'Alene Mining War of 1892: A Case Study of an Industrial Dispute* (Corvallis, 1961), 77.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

Two years later in Montana, troops of the Twenty-fifth were lauded by the Anaconda Company for their successful campaign against a copper miners' strike. On 6 August 1894, the *Anaconda Standard* praised the soldiers: "the majority of the strikers admit that if the soldiers had to be called out there could have been none better than the companies of the Twenty-fifth Infantry who were encamped here."¹⁶ While this statement is meant to support the *Standard's* pro-capital position, it also signals the possibility of a more complex situation between white workers and black soldiers. One such account is of the soldiers in the Idaho strike: "on approaching the place where the hunted men were supposed to be concealed, [they] would begin singing some plantation songs until the Canyon rang with the melody, and the dragnet would catch no fish that trip."¹⁷ Such backstories are outnumbered by the predictable animosities that made black strikebreakers beloved by factory and mine owners nationwide. Unions across the country denied membership to black workers, who in turn had fewer qualms about strikebreaking.¹⁸ The soldiers were praised because they proved to be useful in a particular crisis, a fact which encouraged a temporary augmentation of their ultimately still racialized worth. In this way, black soldiers' role in labor struggles mirrored strikebreaking events taking place in eastern cities.¹⁹

Along with the utilitarian attitudes of capital, geographical context also shaped how race functioned as a meaningful category in late nineteenth-century Montana and Idaho. The literature on African Americans in the West often notes these "complexities and contradictions of the racial order," yet tends toward vagueness about the settings that allow these qualities to coexist.²⁰ Through paying attention to how the Twenty-fifth Infantry was regarded, not just in "the West" but in particular sites, we can see how the new states functioned as liminal sites—both part of the United States and outside it in terms of black-white racial hierarchies. The soldiers occupied different subject positions in different places. This was in part because of their obvious mobility, as they were visibly moving through places rather than staying put. The

¹⁶ Bailey and Bruner-Wilson, *Fort Missoula's Military Cyclists*, 3.

¹⁷ May Arkwright Hutton, *The Coeur D'Alenes; or, A Tale of the Modern Inquisition in Idaho* (Wallace, ID, 1900), 146–7.

¹⁸ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (New York, 2007). An exception to union segregation was the United Mine Workers, whose membership was 25 percent black in 1900. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom: The Story of African America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), 207. The Western Mine Workers, however, were associated with the American Federation of Labor. Clayton D. Laurie, "The United States Army and the Labor Radicals of the Coeur D'Alenes: Federal Military Intervention in the Mining Wars of 1892–1899," *Idaho Yesterdays* 37 (Summer 1993): 12–29.

¹⁹ Warren C. Whatley, "African-American Strikebreaking from the Civil War to the New Deal," *Social Science History* 17 (Winter 1993): 525–58.

²⁰ Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 160; Horton and Horton, *Hard Road to Freedom*, 196; and Margaret Washington, "African American History and the Frontier Thesis," *Journal of the Early Republic* 13 (Summer 1993): 230–41.

geographical trajectory of their travels had political valences as well: the destination and terminal point of the cross-country trip was St. Louis, gateway to the South from the directional vantage point of the travelers (rather than the usual "Gateway to the West"). Lieutenant Moss and most of the bicycle corps soldiers originally hailed from the South. The direction of their cycling east and south to St. Louis thus further shaped their personal and political positions within the narrative as well as in terms of the logistics of the cross-country journey.

A note on sources is in order. Moss's writings and *Daily Missoulian* reporter Boos's updates are the only known extant descriptions of the travels, not least because these two were in positions of authority that included keeping records. Although the soldiers were each issued pen and paper on the overland journey, none of their writings have survived in archives.²¹ Moss wrote military reports, and he also published his journals in travel and cycling magazines.²² The focus and the silences of these reports are a window onto the racially marked status of the soldiers and the unmarked status of the white bicyclists. These texts directly address the techniques of cross-country bicycle travel on new Spalding "safety" bicycles. Indirectly, they speak volumes about the role of racial hierarchies in the peacetime Army in the West and about the unique positions of race and place that this cross-country brigade temporarily assigned all involved.

Moss and Boos recorded hardly any quotations from the soldiers in any of their records, and few of the soldiers' statements that ended up in print are credited to individuals. These mentions are mostly instances of joking around, of the soldiers having a good time when they could. At an especially grueling moment on a practice ride, Moss reported that the soldiers kept up their spirits while walking their bikes in the rain through ankle-deep mud by calling out, "Dere was no bicycles one hundred years ago; Oh how I wish I lived one hundred years ago . . . A mule! A mule! My kingdom for a mule!"²³ Moss's association of black men enjoying themselves with stereotypical performances geared toward white audiences illustrated the distance between his troops and himself based on race rather than rank: "Someone was continually falling off, on account of the wheels turning in the dust . . . and for several miles continuous peals of hearty laughter reverberated through this dark, dusty canyon. Indeed one might have thought on hearing us, that a minstrel show 'on wheels' was giving an open-air

²¹ The only reference to the bicycle corps that I found in the National Archives files of the soldiers was a 1910 pension application from Frank Johnson, who had "the piles & rheumatism . . . received by riding a bicycle from Fort Missoula Montana to Saint Louis Missouri." Frank Johnson, "Declaration for Original Invalid Pension," 18 May 1910, State of New York, County of New York, National Archives Building, Washington, DC. George Sorensen (personal communication, November 2009) and Charles Dollar were also unable to locate any of the soldiers' writings.

²² James Moss, "Recent Experiments in Infantry Bicycling Corps," *Outing: An Illustrated Monthly Magazine of Recreation* 29 (February 1897): 488–93.

²³ Moss quoted in Sorensen, *Iron Riders*, 47.

performance in those wild mountains."²⁴ The novelty of the setting, a "dark, dusty canyon" in "wild mountains," merely supplied the "minstrel show" with an odd stage rather than doing away with the reference altogether. Moss summons further stereotypes in his version of what occurred when the group had to split up for a night due to bike repairs. One can only conjecture how he would have portrayed Boos and Kennedy, the other two white men on the trip, if they had been part of the exchange. He surely would not have followed the template employed in describing the black troops: "As we mounted our wheels and swiftly glided away, Haynes and Proctor, stood gazing at each other amid the loneliness of the surrounding mountains. The rest of the soldiers 'jollied' them with such expressions as, 'You had better look out: de cayotes are going ter eat you up ter night.'"²⁵

The absence of the soldiers' firsthand accounts takes on an additional irony in Moss's field notebooks and magazine articles, as he compulsively recorded all sorts of other details. While he describes the bicycle soldiers as possessing the will and stamina to ride under grueling circumstances, their individual voices and volition are notably absent. In his trip logs, the bodies of the soldiers are presented in states of military discipline and order, in their physical experiences of pain and strength, in recreational joy, and as symbols of American power. Moss's and Boos's representations of the soldiers moving over the land in the West are imbued with patriotic fervor and a sense of national purpose. Race figures prominently and obliquely in these stories, even while the shared purpose of the voyage often made a cohesive group out of the twenty-two men.

On 6 August 1896, eight bicycle soldiers embarked on the first extended trip, to McDonald Lake on the Flathead Indian Reservation, fifty miles north of Missoula.²⁶ The farmers and ranchers they passed regarded the soldiers as curiosities, a response that was to repeat itself on all subsequent bicycle trips. In his official report, Moss notes that, "We attracted a great deal of attention all along the route. Horses and cows ran from us and dogs ran after us, while the inhabitants stopped their work and gazed at us in astonishment."²⁷ Moss does not explain what provoked this astonishment from white settlers and Native Americans. Was it a fear of U.S. soldiers, surprise that they were black, that they were on bicycles instead of horses, or a combination of these factors?

Although Moss presented the Native inhabitants of the Flathead Reservation as slack-jawed spectators, they had only recently suffered the presence of both white and

²⁴ Bailey and Bruner-Wilson, *Fort Missoula's Military Cyclists*, 11.

²⁵ James Moss, "Report on the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps Trip to Yellowstone," 1896, 5, folder 2, box 1, series II, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Fort Missoula Collection no. 100, Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula (hereafter Moss Reports).

²⁶ Robert Bigart and Clarence Woodcock, eds., *In the Name of the Salish & Kootenai Nation: The 1855 Hell Gate Treaty and the Origin of the Flathead Indian Reservation* (Pablo, MT, 1996). The Flathead Indian Reservation was established in an area that was the home of several bands of the Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille tribes.

²⁷ Moss, "Itinerary of the Trip to Lake McDonald," 1896, [unpaginated], Moss Reports.

black soldiers. The General Allotment Act of 1887 (also known as the Dawes Act) had begun the federal project of carving up Indian land into individual allotments; in the Flathead it was resisted until 1904.²⁸ The Twenty-fifth Infantry had been assigned to Demersville and Ravalli, towns north of and on the reservation, respectively, in 1890 to "prevent Indian outbreaks" and protect settlers against "marauding bands of Kootenai." The next year, Salish bands that had remained in the Bitterroot Valley were forcibly moved onto the reservation.²⁹ The soldiers bicycled through Indian Country as envoys of the federal government and as part of an experiment designed to increase the military power of the very nation that had just recently forced these tribes into settlement on the Flathead Reservation. In short, the Indians that "gazed in astonishment" may have in fact been curious about the arrival of this latest installation of American soldiers rather than stunned by the novelty of black men on bicycles.

Moss, for his part, seems delighted with the attention he perceived from onlookers, as his journals note this reaction among people (and animals!) several times. These tidbits are a respite from the bulk of the text, which describes the discomfort and drudgery of travel in meticulous detail: "This part of our journey was exceedingly dreary and tiresome. In mud and rain, we were plodding along one after another, rolling our wheels up hills and with much care riding down slippery hills. Every once in a while we would strike an Indian cabin and the dogs' barking would announce our approach, while the occupants would run to the door and gaze at us. Our shoes were filled with mud and it was very difficult to keep our feet on the muddy pedals."³⁰ McDonald Lake was chosen as a destination because the route included several steep hills and roadbeds of varying grades and smoothness. It was thus ideal terrain for testing the bicycle "under changing conditions." After a laborious journey that included multiple breakdowns and persistent rain, the soldiers went trout fishing at McDonald Lake and "caught them nearly as fast as they could pull them out."³¹

In a sort of inversion of the federal control of Indian reservations, lands technically not ceded but strong-armed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in practice, the establishment of national parks orchestrated a revision of western history by denying Native presence. The national parks' creation required the physical eviction of Indians and the consequent discursive erasure of their presence through a re-coding of the area as "wilderness, untouched by man."³² The erasure of the human history of the lands that

²⁸ Salish-Pend d'Oreille Culture Committee, *A Brief History of the Salish and Pend d'Oreille Tribes* (St. Ignatius, MT, 2003), 47.

²⁹ Henry Elwood, "The 25th (colored) Infantry Regiment," *Flathead Beacon* (Kalispell, MT), 23 July 1986.

³⁰ Moss, "Itinerary of the Trip to Lake McDonald," Moss Reports.

³¹ Moss quoted in Sorensen, *Iron Riders*, 38.

³² Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York, 1999). Spence's history of Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks addresses the specifics of Indian removal.

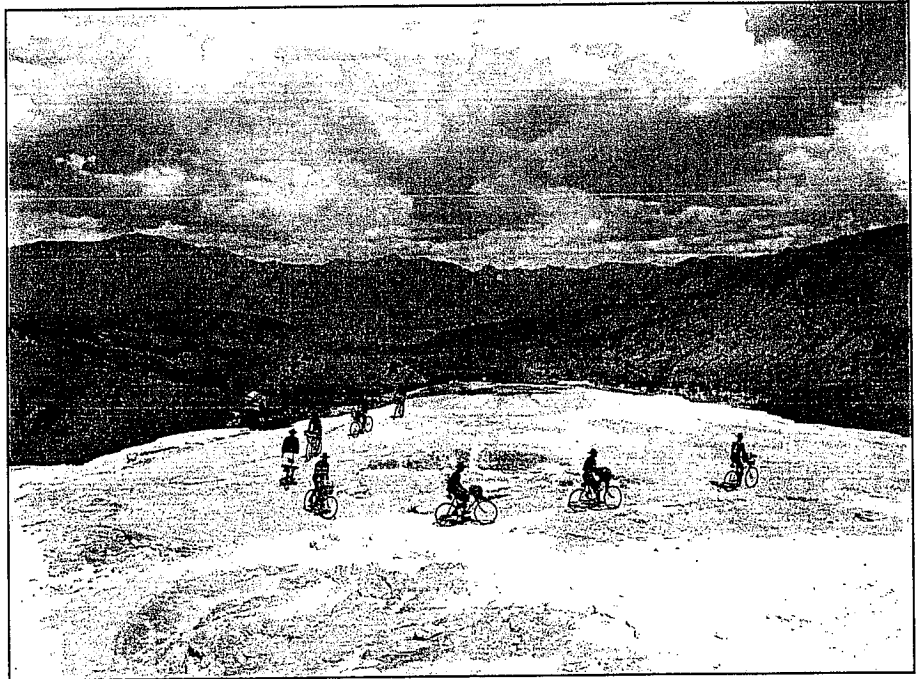


Figure 2. Bicyclists on top of terraces, 1896, by Frank J. Haynes. F. J. Haynes Collection, H-3616. Photo courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Research Center, Photograph Archives, Helena, Montana.

became national parks is standard fare for tourists and is discussed elsewhere.³³ In visitor brochures and ranger talks, Native American history is routinely presented on the scale of geological history, while history proper begins with Canadian and American trappers.

On their second practice ride, the bicycle soldiers pedaled to the country's first national park, Yellowstone, designated in 1872. While western land was most often described during the nineteenth century in terms of its potential utility for ranching and farming, a different value was attached to the land within the park's boundaries. All national parks present nature as spectacle—a frame of understanding especially well suited for Yellowstone, filled with fumaroles, spewing geysers, and buffalo. In *Iron Riders*, an illustrated history of the bicycle corps, George Niels Sorensen enthuses that, “Naturally, it would be a fascinating destination, since everyone had heard of the hot springs and geysers. This would be a chance for the men to see the greatest spectacle in the West.”³⁴ Sorensen's naturalization of the approach to Yellowstone-as-spectacle notwithstanding, the soldiers themselves may indeed have wanted to see these sights. Moss's descriptions of wholesome recreation in the dramatic mountains and valleys of

³³ For example, see Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (Berkeley, 1999).

³⁴ Sorensen, *Iron Riders*, 39.

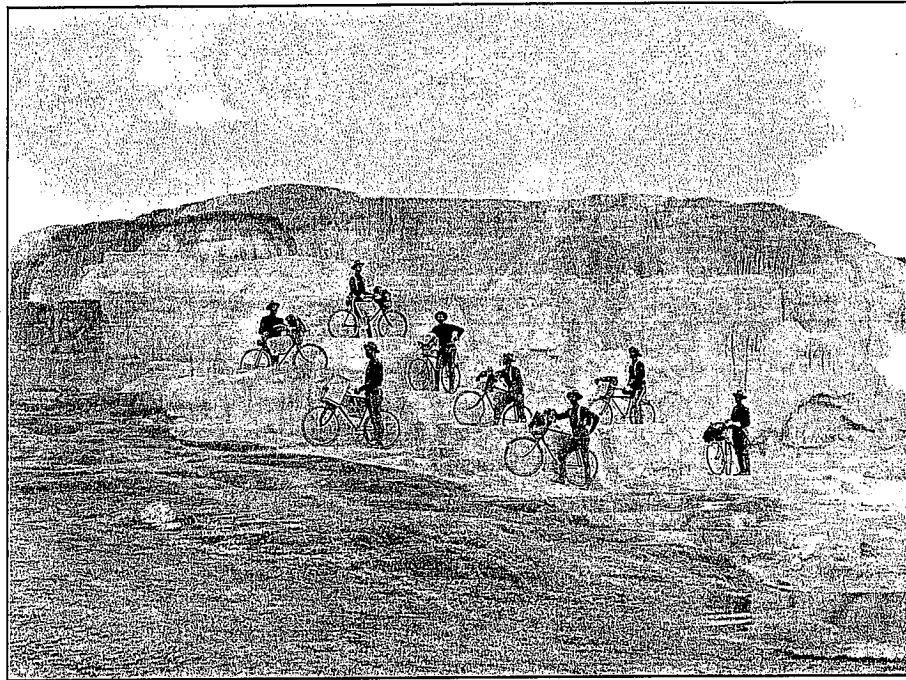


Figure 3. Bicyclist group on Minerva Terrace, 1896, by Frank J. Haynes. F. J. Haynes Collection, H-3614. Photo courtesy of Montana Historical Society, Research Center, Photograph Archives, Helena, Montana.

the park suggest that enjoyment was in fact part of the trip for the soldiers: "The men were particularly awed by Firehole Lake . . . Along the Firehole River they not only caught trout, but cooked them in boiling pools at the water's edge."³⁵ Through such joyful leisure pursuits, the soldiers performed quintessentially American activities, in a place that celebrates nation through and in its landscape.

Frank Jay Haynes, the official photographer of Yellowstone, took many pictures of the bicycle corps on their tour through the park.³⁶ These depictions are remarkably different from the usual Army photos of soldiers lined up in formation. Haynes's photos are posed yet playful and celebrate the natural scenery as well as the group within the scene. (See Figures 2 and 3.)

The soldiers perform doubly as Americans in these pictures, as Army men and as recreational visitors to the park. While such photos documenting black soldiers riding in a circle on Minerva Terrace and posing for the camera depend on practices of looking that include the "white gaze," they also claim Yellowstone for black Americans. The

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁶ Freeman Tilden, *Following the Frontier with F. Jay Haynes: Pioneer Photographer of the Old West* (New York, 1964). Frank Haynes was the most widely published photographer of the western United States in the late nineteenth century.

photos are not just of the soldiers but of Minerva Terrace, a famous natural feature in a recognizably western place. In this way, they also document the soldiers' participation in the American act of national tourism. The very existence of the photographs speaks to the importance of the sight of the soldiers and consequently also of the documentary act. At the same time, the lack of individuality discernible among the soldiers is racially inflected. This is not just because they are in uniform or because the camera is at a distance. Rather, their poses resonate with late nineteenth-century white viewers' expectations of being entertained by the visual spectacle of black men.³⁷ In short, the soldiers-as-spectacle are presented alongside nature-as-spectacle in the park in Haynes's photos. Moss's journal bears out this reading:

Aug. 25. Took picture of a bear on a bicycle. Reached Government shack 1 mile this side Grand Canyon Hotel, at 3 P.M.. The next morning several tourists came to camp to take pictures of the bicycle corps. After breakfast rode around the Grand Canyon taking in the Lower Falls, Look Out View, Inspiration Point and other points of interest. . . . Soldiers delighted with the trip—treated royally everywhere—thought the sights grand. I think the sulphuric fumes and roaring from some of the geysers had a good moral [sic] effect on them.³⁸

The morale of the soldiers may have been at a high point due to the "sulphuric fumes." Yet this particular configuration of nature, nation, and race was specific to Yellowstone National Park. While the setting of Yellowstone offered the soldiers nature through the lens of the nation, and simultaneously cast them as entertainment for white tourists, their images took on other forms as they pedaled through the northern plains.

Once the trips to the Flathead Reservation and Yellowstone in 1896 proved a success, Moss received permission to lead twenty bicycle soldiers cross-country to St. Louis the following summer. (See Figure 4.)

Moss connects the goals of this extended military exercise with the physical geography of the route: "As the object of the trip was to test most thoroughly the durability and the practicability of the bicycle as a means of transportation for troops, it was necessary that the route should be long and the geography of the country of such a nature as to afford all possible conditions. By selecting St. Louis as our objective, we had a long route with high and low altitudes; moist and dry climates; up grades and down grades; the mountainous and stony roads of Montana, the hummock earth roads of South Dakota; the sandy roads of Nebraska and the clay roads of Missouri."³⁹

³⁷ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, 1999). Smith offers an excellent analysis of culturally constructed ways of seeing.

³⁸ Moss, "Report on 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps Trip to Yellowstone," 7–8, Moss Reports. Moss likely means "morale," as in the fumes had a good effect on their morale.

³⁹ Moss, "Report of a Bicycle Trip from Ft. Missoula, Mont. to St. Louis, Mo.," 1897, 3, folder 4, Moss Reports.

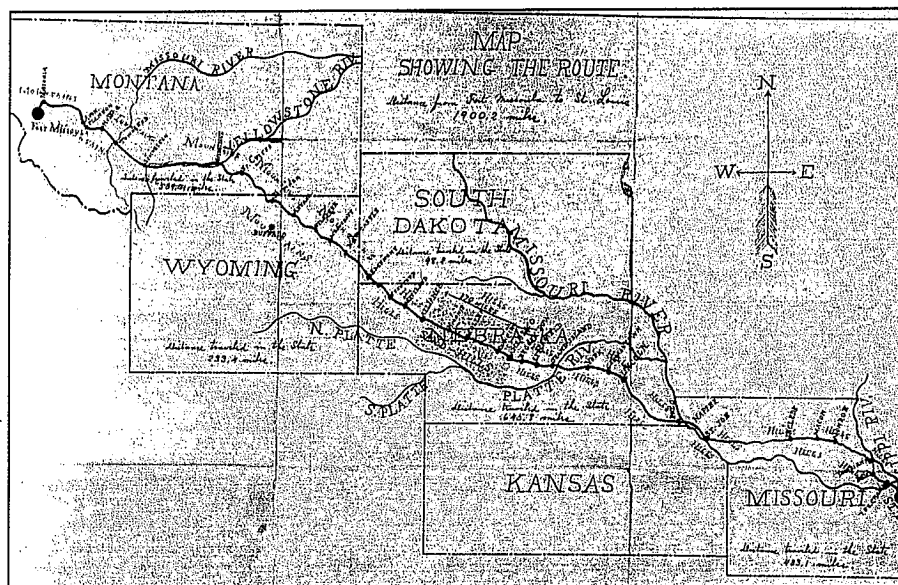


Figure 4. Map of cross-country route drawn by Lieutenant James Moss, 1897, MSS 100, folder 4, box 1, series II, Fort Missoula Collection. Map courtesy of Archives and Special Collections, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library, University of Montana–Missoula.

The physical movement of the soldiers over the land was itself an experiment, one that suffused their toil and plodding with patriotic purpose. The United States was represented as terrain, encountered through bodily effort and mobility from west to east. Page after page, both Moss's reports and Boos's newspaper accounts of the corps' progress focus on the conditions of the roads. Their descriptions of mud, wind, rain, and alkali accrue to produce an effect of numbing repetition, of the obstinacy of a wide land difficult to cross, and of the determination of the corps to do so. Even when they were forced to labor individually, the soldiers are described as unfailing in pursuit of their common purpose: to move their bicycles onward and over the rough roads. "It was impossible to keep any kind of a formation while traveling thro' the country—every cyclist very naturally picked the best way," Moss wrote. "It was a case of 'every fellow for himself and the devil for us all.'"⁴⁰ Overcoming the clinging mud and navigating rocky roads was not Sisyphean toil; rather, the struggle over the country's rough terrain was understood as an act on behalf of the nation. The soldiers' marginal location in the citizenry of the country was, for a time, less important than their mission.

Yet Moss's racist tendencies also affected his logistical choices, including representations of his "boys" and the articulation of the trip's purpose as a military project serving U.S. interests. Some representations, such as his portrayal of the soldiers as childish, are unsurprising. Others, such as his practices of measurement and the representations

⁴⁰ Moss, "Report on 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps Trip to Yellowstone," 16, Moss Reports.

of the soldiers' volition, operate indirectly and must be understood within historically specific discourses of raced and gendered bodies.

The purpose of the long-distance bicycle trips was to measure the efficiency of the bicycle over other means of transportation, and Moss measured everything and anything in his quest for quantitative proof. Food and group gear were enumerated and weighed, and personal items were detailed down to the toothbrush: "Every soldier carried one blanket, one shelter-tent half and poles, one yard mosquito netting, one bicycle wiping cloth, one handkerchief, one pair drawers, one undershirt, two pair socks, one knife, fork, spoon, cup, tin plate, toilet paper, tooth brush and powder. Every other man carried one towel, and one cake soap."⁴¹

The soldiers themselves were weighed, alone and with their packed bicycles, before and after each extended trip. At these points in the text, they appear as part of the mechanical ensemble, as another quantifiable physical factor along with mileage, broken spokes, and minutes rested at midday. Indirectly, these practices accomplish a pervasive racialization of the soldiers, who are controlled and put to use for the purposes of an American project, always under the direction of a white man. These practices of weighing and measuring were standard Army discipline to which Moss also subjected himself, while the other two white cyclists, civilian rider Boos and Army surgeon Kennedy, were exempted. Yet surveillance of personal items and body measurements taken of the black men by a white officer suggest the relatively recent realities of the slavery auction block, in which men and women were routinely measured and assessed according to their physical potential. The Army's practices here also have a connection to nineteenth-century science and its obsession with black bodies as well as with degrees of humanness determined by scientific racism and the nascent eugenics movement.⁴²

The journey's success was judged according to quantifiable changes in the soldiers' working bodies: muscle gained or lost, stamina and timing. In contrast, the white men on the expedition all had purposes other than physical movement. Their experience and participation were measured qualitatively: Moss was the mastermind and record keeper, and he measured the success or failure for the whole experiment; Boos was the newspaper correspondent; and Kennedy the doctor. While several of the soldiers are differentiated by their primary tasks—Mingo Sanders was left in command when the troops separated briefly, and John Findley served as the bicycle mechanic—these characteristics remain in the background of the narrative and are not markers of individuality.

This racialized difference between the black and white bicyclists goes beyond the practices of measurement the former were subject to as part of this experiment. The ways in which Moss described the soldiers as persons operates within a larger discourse

⁴¹ Moss, "Report of a Bicycle Trip," 2, Moss Reports.

⁴² Donna Haraway, "Race: Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture. It's All in the Family: Biological Kinship Categories in the Twentieth-Century United States," in *The Haraway Reader* (New York, 2004), 251–94 and Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA, 1981).

of African American inferiority. Indeed, the representations of the soldiers' bodies exist alongside paternalistic depictions of the soldiers' motivations and attitudes. When the men follow orders, their behavior is seen as reflecting their naturally subservient role—not just an adherence to Army discipline but evidence of “the faith colored soldiers have in their officers.” Moss recounts an exchange between a soldier and a tourist in Yellowstone, in which the soldier replies to a query of where they are headed with, “De Lawd only knows, we're follering de lutenant!” When the men relax or enjoy themselves, their rest is presented as a display of their childish or lazy nature. Moss recounts in his journals that when they reached the Continental Divide, “it seemed to amuse the soldiers very much to be able to stand with one foot on the Atlantic slope and the other on the Pacific slope.” Matter-of-fact casual asides from Moss are stunning in their distillation of prevailing stereotypes. When he writes that a “member of the corps upon whose face the map of Africa is most unquestionably stamped, was lazily sitting against a tree,” geography, colonialism, slavery, and racialization are conflated.⁴³ This deployment of racist typology, which biologizes the existence of African Americans and regards them as inherently inferior to whites, is an example of how white males in the post-Reconstruction United States increasingly defined themselves.⁴⁴ In this instance, the West offers not so much a stage for the political crises of the East and South but an extension of these formations into a space previously defined primarily through white usurpation of Native lands and the resistance of Indians to American expansion.

And yet such stereotypical characterizations coexist with moments of camaraderie between the officer and the soldiers, shaped in part by new and unfamiliar spaces. Boos's *Daily Missoulian* newspaper reports contain palpable joy, as he narrates how Moss bought special rations for the soldiers to celebrate the Fourth of July and after they successfully navigated difficult sections of the route. On several occasions, Moss darted to a nearby store and returned to camp with meat, bread, and milk for a celebration with the entire party. While paternalism no doubt played a role in these moments, the bicyclists' daily lives necessitated a physical proximity of shared meals and close accommodations that would have been impossible at a permanent post.

Moving from Montana through Wyoming, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Missouri, the men traveled through land that gradually became more and more the established United States, and less its newly acquired territory. Race was not always the preeminent factor that determined how the soldiers were received in small and remote settlements or in larger towns. Some onlookers were perplexed and suspicious, while others greeted the soldiers with good cheer, food, and drinks. Boos reports: “The corps reached Big Timber, Montana, at 5:15 and stopped a few minutes. An enthusiastic old veteran insisted that the boys had to have a drink, and accordingly called them all

⁴³ Moss quoted in Sorensen, *Iron Riders*, 47.

⁴⁴ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 1995).

over to a neighboring bar."⁴⁵ The veteran, who must have fought for the Union, likely saw the soldiers as both American and black and invited them to have a drink with him because of, not in spite of, the combination of these characteristics. The curiosity, which was reportedly the most common reaction along the route, further suggests that the novel task of the unit was too unusual for old racial mappings to be immediately applied to the men. Further, many of the people encountered were recent European immigrants and, therefore, also marginalized to a degree by racial classifications that ranked Scandinavian and Teutonic peoples considerably below Anglo-Saxon whites.⁴⁶ The corps asked "an ignorant Swede section hand" for directions at one point, and, later on in the journey, they were offered bread and cake by "Germans," who insisted that the soldiers eat their fill on their farm.⁴⁷

Eastern Montana is unambiguously written into the space of the nation in Boos's account of the bicycle corps' visit to the Custer Memorial Battlefield (now Little Bighorn Battlefield). He describes the troops as touring the grounds "with interest" and editorializes that, "It is something of note that on the 21st anniversary day of Custer's last battle, troops on bicycles were viewing the grounds from their silent steeds, around which are bones, the remains of cavalry horses, which fell with Custer and his 230 men."⁴⁸ The irony for Boos is that the horses were heroic casualties in a fight for America, only to be replaced by inanimate machines. Yet Boos did not editorialize about another irony: Custer refused to fight alongside black soldiers, who twenty years later were paying tribute through their visit to the graves.⁴⁹

Surely such poetic justice was not lost on the soldiers, as Custer's discriminatory opinions were well known. Boos, on the other hand, had the luxury of foregrounding the observation that held his interest: the switch from horses to bicycles as the soldiers' "steeds." The bicycle figures in Boos's account as a sign of progress, of U.S. military improvements at the site of the Army's most spectacular defeat by Native Americans. In that moment, the visit of bicycles to the battlefield was of greater importance than the fact that black soldiers were riding them. This connects Montana to the nation in a particular way. At the Custer battlefield Boos could focus on bicycles and horses rather than see racial difference and Manifest Destiny as the salient factors of the battle or its

⁴⁵ Edward Boos, "From Fort to Fort: Fort Harrison Left and Fort Custer Gained After a Hard Struggle," *Daily Missoulian* (Missoula, MT), 10 July 1897.

⁴⁶ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). The northern Rocky Mountain and Plains states had a higher percentage of European immigrants than any other region of the United States in the 1890s, with Montana's above 30 percent. See Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories* (Albuquerque, 1998).

⁴⁷ Edward Boos, "The Sand Abundant: The Bicycle Corps Has Hard Wheeling over Roads in Nebraska," *Daily Missoulian*, 31 July 1897.

⁴⁸ Edward Boos, "Nebraska is Reached: The Twenty-Fifth Infantry Bicycle Corps Still Wheeling Away," *Daily Missoulian*, 17 July 1897.

⁴⁹ Fowler, *Black Infantry*, 66, 115.

commemoration. Indeed, notice of the bicycle corps troops' arrival in three Montana towns had made no mention of their race.

The farther east they went, the stricter the segregation, the longer the history of slavery, and the further the memory of Indian Wars. Reactions to the soldiers in Nebraska and Missouri ran the gamut from friendly to hostile. In this way, they mirrored the schizophrenic racial politics of the 1890s, in which black Americans saw unprecedented opportunities while being subject to frequent violence and discrimination. As they passed through Crawford, Nebraska, the Ninth Cavalry, also a regiment of black soldiers, greeted the riders with their band music "while the thousands of spectators who lined the sidewalks on either side of the street rent the air with the wildest cheers to speed them on their journey."⁵⁰ Black soldiers welcomed the cyclists by making music within a larger crowd of whites, a task that also regularly fell to the men of the Twenty-fifth back in Montana. For the residents of Crawford, the thrill of spectator sports combined with the popularity of the bicycle and the novelty of a high-profile group passing through their small town. New and old expectations operated simultaneously, and this was sharply obvious as the corps crossed the state line into Missouri. Several Missouri newspapers neutrally described the cyclists as "negroes," but not disparagingly. The *Holt County Sentinel*, in far western Missouri near the Nebraska border, explained that, "A regular army soldier is rarely ever seen in our midst, and to see a colored man as such is a still greater novelty—and to see them mounted on wheels with gun strapped over back is an unusually strange sight."⁵¹ A few nights later, Boos requested permission to camp on a farmer's land. "Be you Union soldiers?" the landowner asked. When the reply was affirmative, the farmer responded, "Then you can pile right off a this land."⁵²

Their reception in St. Louis reflected the complex racial politics of that city, home to a strong African American community and continual battles over segregation.⁵³ More than ten thousand enthusiastic visitors welcomed the troops as heroes upon their arrival, feting them with parades and picnics. "Negroes though they were," opined the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* with largesse, "the cyclists of St. Louis who could appreciate their feat were glad to welcome them with honor and make them their guests."⁵⁴ As in Nebraska, the novelty of this unusual spectacle surely resonated with the role that African Americans continued to play in entertaining predominantly white audiences. The *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* noted, "The road to Forest Park was dotted with men, women and children going, not to welcome, particularly, but to inspect critically the flower of the United States army."⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *Crawford (NE) Tribune*, 3 July 1897.

⁵¹ *Holt County Sentinel* (Oregon, MO), 23 July 1897.

⁵² Dollar, "Putting the Army on Wheels," 252.

⁵³ Bryan M. Jack, *The St. Louis African American Community and the Exodusters* (Columbia, MO, 2007), 119–49 and Eric Sandweiss, *St. Louis: The Evolution of an American Urban Landscape* (Philadelphia, 2001).

⁵⁴ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 25 July 1897.

⁵⁵ "Wheelmen at Forest Park," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 26 July 1897.

Indeed, equal treatment did not accompany the enthusiasm that met the bicycle corps upon completion of their journey. While the men had shared cooking duties and close quarters on the ride itself, once in St. Louis, the white and black members of the expedition ate their meals in separate locations: the officers dined at the Cottage in Forest Park while the troops ate in the bicycle shed. One article employed every well-worn racist stereotype in its description of the soldiers as overjoyed to be back in the South, where there was watermelon aplenty: "'We'd be a long time in Missoula before we'd get our faces in a thing like this,' shouted Black Jack, as he whirled the shining bayonet of his gun and planted his ivory teeth in the heart of a juicy quarter."⁵⁶ Other reporters were less transparently intimidated by the armed black soldiers who had just succeeded at a patriotic display of athleticism. The *St. Charles Cosmos* deemed the soldiers "excellent specimens of physical manhood."⁵⁷ The *Post-Dispatch* was also complimentary: "For all their woe-begone appearance the men are full of life. Their faces are drawn but their eyes are fine, their step is marvelously elastic, the hardship has made them hard as rocks and the excitement of the trip, as well as the attention they have received along the route, has put them in the best spirits."⁵⁸

The *Post-Dispatch* published sketches of the afternoon festivities. One in particular stands out, as it hints at the complexity of the black soldiers' positions vis-à-vis the voyage and its completion. The caption reads "Old friends meet," and it accompanies a drawing of one of the bicycle soldiers shaking hands with an older black man with a cane. This image suggests that the congratulations may have been on two counts: kudos for the successful completion of the journey and a moment of racial solidarity between a current soldier and an elderly man, who had doubtless seen much struggle in his life. The same paper described the soldiers' uniforms as changed in color after the long journey: "Once upon a time the colors mentioned existed in their uniforms. Snow, rain, sun, dust and perspiration have reduced their outfits to neutral tints. Their leggins are gray. So are their gloves. The trousers, specially reinforced, are ragged and streaked with marks of dust and rain. All semblance of color has left their shirts, their natty blue coats couldn't be sold for dust rags in a second-hand clothing store."⁵⁹

The color of the troops is unmentioned, and considering the context—thirty years after the Civil War, in a border state—the colors of the Union fading into gray on the soldiers must be understood on both literal and figurative registers. Materially, the long journey simply faded their uniforms. Figuratively, the absence of skin color in the otherwise detailed description of the appearance of the soldiers suggests a bracketing, conscious or unconscious, of racial markers by a white reporter for the purposes of celebrating the arrival of American soldiers. The actual physical parts of the country that the soldiers carried on their clothes and in their shoes—the dirt and rocks that

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *St. Charles (MO) Cosmos*, 9 July 1897.

⁵⁸ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 23 July 1897.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

both hindered and constituted their route—mark the new lands they had crossed as part of the United States.

The image of the dusty threads of the soldiers aptly distills the meaning of their journey; their mobility was suffused with morality. Mobility was both the purpose of their effort and its reward in the form of their arrival after successfully pedaling nineteen hundred miles on one-speeds. In his exacting descriptions of the journey and the effort it required, Moss renders the struggle of travel itself into a purposeful act. A day was deemed successful if the corps reached a specific destination by nightfall, and all other considerations, such as the state of the equipment or the physical condition of the soldiers, were secondary. In Boos's reports, a military ethic of persistence under extreme conditions combines with Manifest Destiny to produce an amplified effect. One particular instance is worth quoting in its entirety for how it depicts the patriotic virtue of movement over a rough land, one crucially not yet entirely part of the United States:

We found an old Indian cabin of which we took possession and soon had a fire going in the stove which was found in the old shack. We were wet, cold and hungry, and a more jaded set of men never existed. We went to bed as quickly as possible and had a fair rest. The distance traveled that day was about 50 miles. Our cyclometers were choked up with mud the last mile or two. The last mile took two hours of constant work. June 24 we left the old cabin at 6:30 with our clothes still wet. The first six miles was over the wet gumbo mud, and we worked like beavers to get out of this section as soon as possible. We were between two fires—hard roads, head wind and up hill on one hand and scanty rations with no means of getting any more on the other. We were on the Crow Indian reservation and far from a railroad.⁶⁰

The last sentence functions as the bottom line, the overarching condition of which the specific difficulties detailed earlier are merely parts. The Crow Indian Reservation is presented as unambiguously outside of the United States, remote and removed.⁶¹ Beyond the virtue ascribed to their movement through Indian land, the meaning of this act extends into the transportation corridor itself. Like Boos, Moss does not express exasperation with the vast distances as much as with the condition of the paths. Moss connects virtue with smooth roads and regards impassable routes as a national embarrassment:

Some of the roads were about as good dirt roads as could be found anywhere in the United States, while others were a disgrace to civilization. As a rule we found the roads an index to the people of the communities

⁶⁰ Boos, "From Fort to Fort."

⁶¹ The last spike of the Northern Pacific Railway was driven at Gold Creek, Montana, in 1883. Frank J. Haynes photographed the Crow chiefs present at the ceremony.

through which we passed. Where the roads were properly graded and well worked, the inhabitants were well informed, used modern farming implements, had fine wind-mills and other conveniences. On the other hand, where the roads were in a bad condition and evidently much neglected, the people were narrow-minded, devoid of any knowledge of the topography of the country, and behind the times in everything.⁶²

Transportation corridors are thus understood to be more than arteries for the flow of people and goods. Roads are an index through which the corps could measure the worth of the area's inhabitants in terms of late nineteenth-century standards as industrious, literate, and with the times. The absence of good roads, the state of corridors in disrepair or nonexistence, is therefore not just a sign of isolation but of depravity. Time and again, Boos's and Moss's writings illustrate this conflation of the poor condition or nonexistence of the roads with their patriotic attempt to travel on them. At one point in the journey, somewhere in South Dakota, the road changed from impassable to simply gone. The "yawning abyss" would have swallowed the soldiers if Boos had not been up front and vigilant, scouting alertly for all types of hazards, such as inclement weather, surly natives, and the sudden appearance of chasms. Boos reported on his own heroic deed: "The writer was leading the way when suddenly a yawning abyss presented itself in our front, breaking the road in two. Only a few inches more and the whole corps would have gone over this cliff and met with some serious accidents."⁶³ This story reads like a tall tale, but its exaggerations illustrate that a preference for smooth roads is more than a technical objection to bumps and potholes. Proper roads signify colonial conquest and modernity itself. The western states simply could not truly be a part of the country until their transportation infrastructure improved.⁶⁴

The most vocal calls for road improvements, it turned out, came from bicyclists. The League of American Wheelmen (LAW), a bicycling association that spearheaded the Good Roads Movement, also linked smooth roads to national improvement in their persistent lobbying. In the 1890s, the LAW had enough political clout to convince the federal government to create and fund a Department of Public Roads, precursor to today's Federal Highway Administration. The LAW instituted a whites-only membership clause in 1894, one of the country's first pieces of Jim Crow legislation, at the height of the national bicycling craze.⁶⁵ Moss nevertheless construed himself and

⁶² Moss, "Report of a Bicycle Trip," 6, Moss Reports.

⁶³ Boos, "Nebraska is Reached."

⁶⁴ Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton, 2002). Mrázek made this observation about smooth roads as signifying modernity in a different colonial context, Indonesia.

⁶⁵ The LAW allowed all-black bicycling clubs to join the national organization, but local clubs from New York to California enforced segregation in professional and amateur races. World-record champion Major Taylor, a young African American racer from Chicago, was denied the opportunity to race alongside white cyclists in the national championships in 1897 and 1898.

the bicycle corps as ambassadors of and to the nation, firmly in line with the LAW. He wrote, "The bicycle will, I think, do more to solve the good-road's [sic] question in this country than all other factors combined. Indeed, the 'L.A.W.' colors that flew from my handlebars were the messenger of deliverance from bad roads."⁶⁶ Upon the bicycle corps' arrival in St. Louis, members of the local LAW chapter accompanied them on bicycles, temporarily suspending their own segregation codes.

After completing the St. Louis venture, Moss proposed a fourth bicycle corps trip, from Fort Missoula to San Francisco and back. The purpose of this trip was not to experiment with the bicycle, which had passed the cross-country test with flying colors. Instead, it directly addressed the politics of race, spectacle, and transport. The project's aim was to educate ignorant whites about the virtues of black soldiers. Colonel A. S. Burt of the Twenty-fifth Infantry endorsed this idea in a supporting letter: "It is well-known there is a prejudice against the colored man . . . It is a wise policy to educate the people to become familiar with the colored man as a soldier . . . The expedition proposed by Lieutenant Moss would be a fine educator. The one he made last year to St. Louis had a very happy effect. The men by their behavior won the respect of everybody."⁶⁷

Yet the proposed San Francisco journey never happened. The Spanish-American War began in 1898, and the companies of the Twenty-fifth Infantry stationed in Missoula were the first American soldiers sent to Cuba. The *Daily Missoulian* reported the troops' last public appearance: "The citizens of Missoula turned out en masse to see the boys off. The line of march was lined with our own citizens and many country folks who had come miles to see the troops depart. The boys in blue passed through the streets with band playing and colors gayly flying, most likely for the last time in this city. They never presented a prettier picture and the few who had looked upon their departure with indifference up to this time changed their minds and came to the conclusion that the troops would be missed."⁶⁸

The troops were never more popular than at the moment of their departure from the town they had spent a decade serving. As they marched from Fort Missoula to the railroad station, the notion of black men in uniform no longer jarred. While previously positive sentiments about the soldiers were limited to an appreciation of their politeness and musical abilities, they became "boys in blue,"—foot soldiers of American interests overseas—once they were slated to depart native soil. The mobility of the bicycle corps thereby segued into their mobilization. As they "passed through the streets," the upstanding citizens never before enthusiastic about the black troops could fully appreciate them at last.

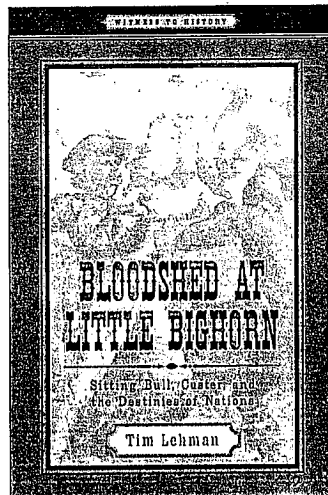
Andrew Ritchie, "The League of American Wheelmen, Major Taylor and the 'Color Question' in the United States in the 1890s," *Culture, Sport, Society* 6 (Summer/Autumn 2003): 13–43.

⁶⁶ Moss, "Report of a Bicycle Trip."

⁶⁷ Bailey and Bruner-Wilson, *Fort Missoula's Military Cyclists*, 24.

⁶⁸ "Good Bye to 25th," *Daily Missoulian*, 11 April 1898.

Black men on bicycles were both an unusual sight and a complicated subject position to occupy in this era. Notwithstanding their individual reasons for joining the Army and volunteering for the bicycle corps, the men's roles were deeply enmeshed in the national project. As soldiers, they furthered U.S. interests through busting unions and quelling Indian resistance. At the same time, it was the racist intolerance of the South and East that relegated them to the edges of the American empire and kept them moving even while stationed on the periphery. In biking through Indian reservations, national parks, and battlefields, and to St. Louis, they embodied the contradictions in the national rhetoric of freedom through westward mobility. In 1903, Teddy Roosevelt laid the first stone of the entryway arch to Yellowstone National Park, a few miles north of where the bicycle soldiers had posed for Haynes's camera. Between that symbolic act and his dismissal of all the soldiers of the Twenty-fifth stationed in Brownsville three years later, we can read the uneven and unjust racial politics of American westward expansion.



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