

THE FORGOTTEN SOLDIER

The one and only time I was ever in Boston, I arranged to be there on the fifth day of March. I wanted to get an idea of what the weather was like on that date in 1770. Sure, my experiment took place 200 years or so later but still, it was the best I could do.

There was snow and lots of it. It was cold--a wet penetrating cold. My toes tingled, my nose just about fell off and my hands were so cold I couldn't crook my trigger finger if I needed to. According to all reports, that is pretty much the way it had been in 1770.

It was on that date that the Boston Massacre took place. British Redcoats fired a volley of shots into a crowd, killing three straightway and mortally wounding two others. Those were the first fatalities of the American Revolution and the very first to fall was a black man - Crispus Attucks. Even after so many years, there are still United States history texts which do not acknowledge Attucks and many of those few which do fail to let us know that he was black.

He was not alone. There were many other blacks who fought in the American Revolution and they fought on both sides. While white colonials fought to put an end to the alleged oppression of the British Crown, large numbers of black slaves ran away from the plantations, joined the British who promised them freedom upon victory, and fought for that. Eventually the Continental Congress allowed blacks to fight for the cause of independence with the same promise.

Black participation was not limited to serving as soldiers. They served in the navy, as spies, in logistics and all other aspects of the war. When the British were finally defeated and surrendered at Yorktown, Virginia in 1782, it was time for celebrations but not for blacks. Promises of liberation were forgotten and they were back to business as usual - slavery.

Thirty years later, in 1813, what is sometimes called the second American revolution took place with the War of 1812 which lasted until 1815. Once again, blacks were active participants. This was especially true in the final battle which, incidentally, took place after the treaty ending the war had been signed. The Battle of New Orleans has become

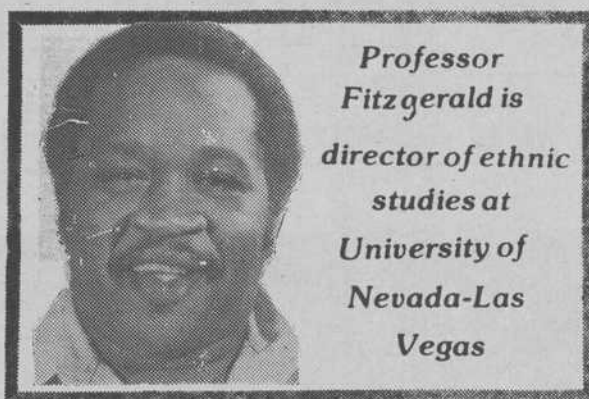
part of American folklore although black participation has not always been acknowledged.

Facing a large force of British soldiers crossing Lake Borne, General Andrew Jackson mustered whatever forces he could in defense of the city. Many of the natives of New Orleans were hesitant about risking their lives as it did not really matter to them who dominated the city. They had lived under many flags so it was not important to them who was in charge.

Jackson's rag-tag army consisted of some regulars, some Tennessee Volunteers, Jean Lafit's pirates from Barataria and slaves. Their defenses were set up at Chalmette Plantation. Then it started. The British soldiers marched in formation and they were cut down like rescue grass by a Toro mower. Then it was over. As a freshman in college at Xavier University of New Orleans, I participated in a field trip with a history class to the site of the battle. We saw the battlements, cannons and the plain across which the British came. We saw a film and in the film were the British, the American regulars, the Tennessee Volunteers and the pirates. There were no blacks. They didn't get lost on the way to the battle, they got lost on the way to the history books.

Recently, a film titled "Glory" addressed the presence of black soldiers in the Civil War. While the film only pertained to one regiment, there were many. Approximately 140,000 black people served in the Civil War. They didn't get lost on the way to Fredericksburg or Gettysburg or Shiloh or Corinth or any of those other battle sites. They got lost on the way to the history books.

In the half-century following the Civil War, black soldiers served in the west. They were called "Buffalo Soldiers" and they patrolled from the Canadian to the Mexican border. They protected the towns, the mail, stagecoaches, settlers, miners and everything that needed protecting. Sure, there were white soldiers out there too--we know about them already--doing their part. Frederick Remington, the artist, captured their presence and many photographers chronicled their exploits. But the black soldiers didn't get lost when



**Professor
Fitzgerald is
director of ethnic
studies at
University of
Nevada-Las
Vegas**

by Professor Roosevelt Fitzgerald

they went to save a ranch, put down an uprising or forestall major conflict. No. They got lost on the way to the history books.

Then it was 1898 and the Spanish-American War kicked off with the sinking of

the Maine at Havana Harbor. Here we go again. It was during that war that Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders gained fame. The fact that they were bogged down under heavy fire on San Juan Hill and

were about to be wiped out is overlooked. Also overlooked is the fact that were it not for black soldiers who went up San Juan Hill and rescued Teddy and the Rough Riders, they would have gotten their bacon fried. Teddy acknowledged their deeds in his writings, but few others do. Those black Buffalo Soldiers didn't lose their way going up San Juan Hill, they got lost on the way to the history books.

Eighteen years later--just the right amount of time needed to be born and come of age, Woodrow Wilson declared a war that he promised he wouldn't. Before you know it, we were "over there" to make the world safe for democracy. The fact that we

were sent without proper training didn't matter. The fact that the Rainbow Division wouldn't let us in because they said "black is not a color of the rainbow" didn't matter. The fact that the French didn't mind having us help defend their country did matter. We did such a job "over there" that we were called "HELLFIGHTERS." We never had a deserter. We never gave up an inch of real estate, we never called retreat and we always had the terrible swift sword. The French appreciated our efforts. Black doughboys were awarded medal after medal by the French. Sure, Cohen sang about Yankee Doodle Dandy and the white soldiers

See SOLDIER, Page 20

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