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THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

THE NATIONAL PARKS: AMERICA'S BEST IDEA
UNTOLD STORIES DISCUSSION GUIDE

**YOSEMITE'S BUFFALO SOLDIERS AND
NATIONAL PARK RANGER SHELTON
JOHNSON**

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Yosemite's Buffalo Soldiers and National Park Ranger Shelton Johnson

On July 25, 1958, Shelton Johnson was born at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. His father, James O. Johnson, Jr., joined the army and before Shelton was six, he'd lived in California, Germany, England, South Carolina, and Kansas City, finally returning to Detroit for elementary school. Growing up in a working class, inner-city neighborhood of northwest Detroit, Shelton was about as far from wilderness as one could get.

When I was a child in Detroit, national parks really didn't exist, except on television, on PBS. There were no family trips to national parks. They really didn't exist for me and for my friends. We didn't sit around saying, "Boy, can't wait to get to the Grand Canyon!" You know? That didn't come up as a topic of conversation in Detroit. But always somewhere inside me there was this desire to see Yellowstone. There was a desire to see the Grand Canyon. –Shelton Johnson (Shumaker; Burns)

Shelton finally got his chance to visit a national park as a graduate student in an MFA writing program. Looking for a quiet place to write over the summer, he applied for work as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone. "My intention was to write a book," Shelton says. "Then, *Yellowstone happened*" (Shumaker).

I remember the first time I arrived in Yellowstone. I got off a bus and we were in Gardiner, Montana, right outside the north entrance where there's that wonderful stone arch that says, "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People." And it doesn't say "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of Some of the People" or "a Few of the People." It says "All of the People." And for me, that meant democracy; that meant I was welcome. I stepped outside and as I was stepping down onto the ground, there was a bison – a 2,000-pound animal – walking by. There was no one else around and the bison was just strolling by! I looked up at the driver and I said, "Does this happen all the time?" and he looked at me and said, "All the time." And I said to myself, "I've arrived."

Once I stepped off that bus, I never got back on. And I've been in national parks ever since. –Shelton Johnson (Burns 3)

From washing dishes at the Old Faithful Inn to running a dorm for other seasonal workers, that summer was a defining time for Shelton. In 1985, Shelton applied to enter the park service and become a ranger. From that moment on, he was hooked. "Once I had the uniform on," Shelton says, "Wow – that was it!" (Shumaker).

African Americans in the Parks

During that first summer in Yellowstone, when he was still washing dishes, Shelton and a friend found themselves at Old Faithful. "I don't understand," she said, noticing something missing from the boardwalks crisscrossing the geysers and hot springs. "Where are all the black people?" (Shumaker).

That question stuck with Shelton. While working as an interpreter at Fort Dupont Park (NPS National Capital Parks East), in 1992–1993, he had the opportunity to speak with inner city

school kids in Washington, DC. “These were kids living in Anacostia, southeast DC,” Shelton says, “in the middle of the crack wars.” 1993 was the peak of violence in the area, with 133 homicides recorded (“Anacostia”).

I remember talking to them about my experiences in Yellowstone and Grand Teton and it was like I was talking about Mars or Jupiter. It was as far-flung from their experience as if I was Neil Armstrong talking about what it felt like to be on the moon.

They had never seen mountains; they had never seen anything having to do with nature. That’s when I first made the resolution that I had to figure out how to connect these kids with nature, to get them to have a nature experience. —Shelton Johnson (Associated Press 3; Shumaker)

Buffalo Soldiers

Shelton was eventually transferred to the place he has worked for more than a decade: Yosemite. In his early work as an interpreter, Shelton presented a number of programs to Yosemite visitors, but he was always searching for a way to reach kids who felt they had no link to the parks — kids of black ancestry and kids in inner cities. Although he’d heard from his predecessor, Ranger Althea Roberson, about buffalo soldiers patrolling the park, it was almost by accident that he found a picture of them. Shelton says it was “like stumbling into your own family while traveling in a foreign country” (Associated Press 3-4).

I took a closer look at the picture and read the caption. It was a photograph of the 24th Infantry taken somewhere in Yosemite in 1899. The 24th, along with the 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry, were African-American army regiments that during the Indian War period became known as Buffalo Soldiers.

They were African-American soldiers who were part of the Western Frontier, who were part of that great American mythology. So when you have a longing to be part of this mythology and part of this history, and you see an African American staring out at you wearing that uniform, it anchors you and roots you into a past you didn't even know you had.

I knew — in the instant that I saw that — that I was looking at the most significant thing that I had to do in my career as a park ranger. I saw the bridge that would tie wilderness to the African-American community right there in the faces and in the eyes of those dead soldiers who were looking at me from across a distance of 100 years. — Shelton Johnson (*Shadows in the Range of Light*; Shumaker)

In the years before the creation of the National Park Service, the U.S. army patrolled the parks, building and maintaining trails and wagon roads, and keeping out poachers and grazing animals. During three of those years — 1899, 1903, and 1904 — African American cavalry and infantry, stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco, spent their summers on “park duty,” patrolling Yosemite, Sequoia, and General Grant national parks.

The Buffalo soldiers here in Yosemite built what is considered to be the first museum in the National Park System. In 1903, the 9th Cavalry in Sequoia National Park built the first usable wagon road into Giant Forest, which is the most famous grove of giant sequoia in the world, and the first trail to the top of Mount Whitney, which in those days was the highest mountain in the United States. If that's not worthy of being remembered, I don't know what is. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Shelton got to work, in archives and libraries and in the park itself. He enrolled in Yosemite's Mounted Horse Patrol School, graduating in 1996, so he could understand more fully the soldiers' experience. He conducted extensive research, looking at period uniforms to discover what the buffalo soldiers wore while on patrol and perusing Army Muster Rolls from the late 19th and early 20th century. In the process, Shelton proved that African Americans had served in the park in much greater numbers than previously believed ("About" 1-2).

Elizy Boman

Since 1998, Shelton has told the story of the buffalo soldiers in the national parks – in print, on camera, and in person. During evening programs and daytime ranger walks in Yosemite, he tells the story of the buffalo soldiers in Yosemite through the eyes of a character he's developed: Sergeant Elizy Boman.[†]

The real Elizy Boman was a private in Company A in Sequoia and later was a deserter. I started thinking, "Elizy was a deserter and this history has been deserted; this history has been abandoned." I reassigned Elizy to Troop K in Yosemite so I could tell his story here in the park. I also figured that, after all these years, he deserved a promotion, so I made him a sergeant. –Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Shelton grafted his own family history onto Elizy so that, when he told the story, it would be more authentic, both for himself and his audience.

It's very emotional being Elizy and much more challenging than anything else I've done – becoming a person from a different time period and, on top of that, the son of slaves. For an African American to take that on – talk about being a slave and a sharecropper in South Carolina – is not easy. –Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

In the park, Shelton's audience is primarily white Euro-American tourists, but he also works with students in Yosemite Institute's WildLink program. WildLink brings at-risk and underserved high school students into the park, many for their first wilderness experiences.

Shelton is able to span generations with his program. He's Elizy Boman, which really grounds them in a history of stewardship of this place. But they also get to meet Shelton, who's somebody who's here now and who can share with them his story – how he grew up in an urban city and how he found his way here; that you can live here and work here and it can be an amazing, wonderful life. –Mandy Vance, WildLink Program Director (Shumaker)

Shelton has also taken Elizy on the road, performing in dozens of schools around the country. Students are engaged and excited by Elizy who – Shelton hopes – becomes a conduit for getting them out into nature.

If we forget a Yosemite or a Yellowstone or a Grand Canyon what we've actually forgotten is who we are. We've forgotten the very forces that have shaped us as a people and as a culture.

[†] Pronounced "uh-LEEZ-y BOW-mun."

Everyone needs beauty. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans – whatever group that you happen to be referring to – they all need beauty. –Shelton Johnson (Burns 2, 11)

Throughout, Shelton has remained true to the reason he started this work:

I can't forget that little black kid in Detroit, who knew nothing about the national parks. No one ever told me anything! And I can't not think of the other kids, just like me – in Detroit, Oakland, Watts, Anacostia – today. How do I get them here? How do I let them know about the buffalo soldier history, to let them know that we, too, have a place here? Every time I go to work, and put the uniform on, I think about them. –Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Today, Shelton is the only African American ranger in Yosemite, but tomorrow he hopes to be joined by many others. And for him, it all goes back to a few precious moments in nature.

One of the last jobs I had in Yellowstone was delivering the mail on snowmobile. And as I dropped down into Hadyn Valley, there were bison crossing over the road and it was so cold that the bison, as they breathed, their exhalation seemed to crystallize in the air around them. There were these sheets, these ropy strands, of crystals kind of flowing down from their breath.

I remember stopping the snowmobile and turning it off, and listening. And I felt like this was the first day; this morning was the first time the sun had ever come up. I was all alone but I felt I was in the presence of everything around me. It was one of those moments when you get pulled outside of yourself into the environment around you. I forgot completely about the mail! All I was thinking of was that a single moment in a place as wild as Yellowstone can last forever. –Shelton Johnson (Burns 13)

These experiences, Shelton maintains, are universal, regardless of skin color.

National parks provide a doorway into a transcendent experience – a sense of something that's greater than yourself; a place that's greater than yourself; a way of being that's greater than yourself. And all you have to do is often pay an entrance fee. You pay that fee and you pass over that threshold into that national park and it's a place that's bigger than the name. It's like going to another world, to a wonderland.

And I think that all people feel that transition. But the irony is that where they've gone is the place where they've always been. It's just now they understand it. Now they see it. Now they feel it. Because parks are like going home. –Shelton Johnson (Burns 1)

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