

50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act

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The Buffalo Soldiers

The presentation honored a double 50th, the joint anniversaries of the Civil Rights Act and the Wilderness Act, by focusing on the role the Buffalo Soldiers played in shaping what we know as wilderness today in the U.S. In the Southwest, elements of the 9th and 10th Cavalry, as well as the 24th and 25th Infantry, documented the rugged territory that they rode and walked through. Their maps provided invaluable data for the U.S. Geological Survey of the frontier. Buffalo Soldiers were also among the first park rangers, serving in Yosemite and Sequoia, which were two of the first national parks. Under the able superintendency of Captain Charles Young, the son of a former slave who rose to prominence in the Army, members of the 9th Cavalry I and M Troops built more of the park infrastructure in one summer than the three previous military commanders had been able to build in the previous three years. Finally, the Buffalo Soldiers fought what is still regarded as the largest forest fire in U.S. history, the Big Burn, in 1910. Smoke from this enormous fire, which ate up entire forests in Idaho, Montana, Washington, and British Columbia, could be seen by ships 500 miles out west in the Pacific and as far east as Watertown, NY. To help the forest rangers, who were a new service and overwhelmed, G Company of the 25th Infantry was called up. They defended to the town of Avery, ID, near the Bitterroot Range, but had to retreat from the fire. As it got closer, they were ordered to stand in the entrance to each car of the two trains that evacuated the town and, if the fire got closer, to grab the women and children and hold them in the creek. The second train only just made it out of town to hide in a tunnel, with the trestle burning behind it. These heroic actions and their long service in remote areas of the frontier helped shape the wild spaces we see today.