Cane River Creole

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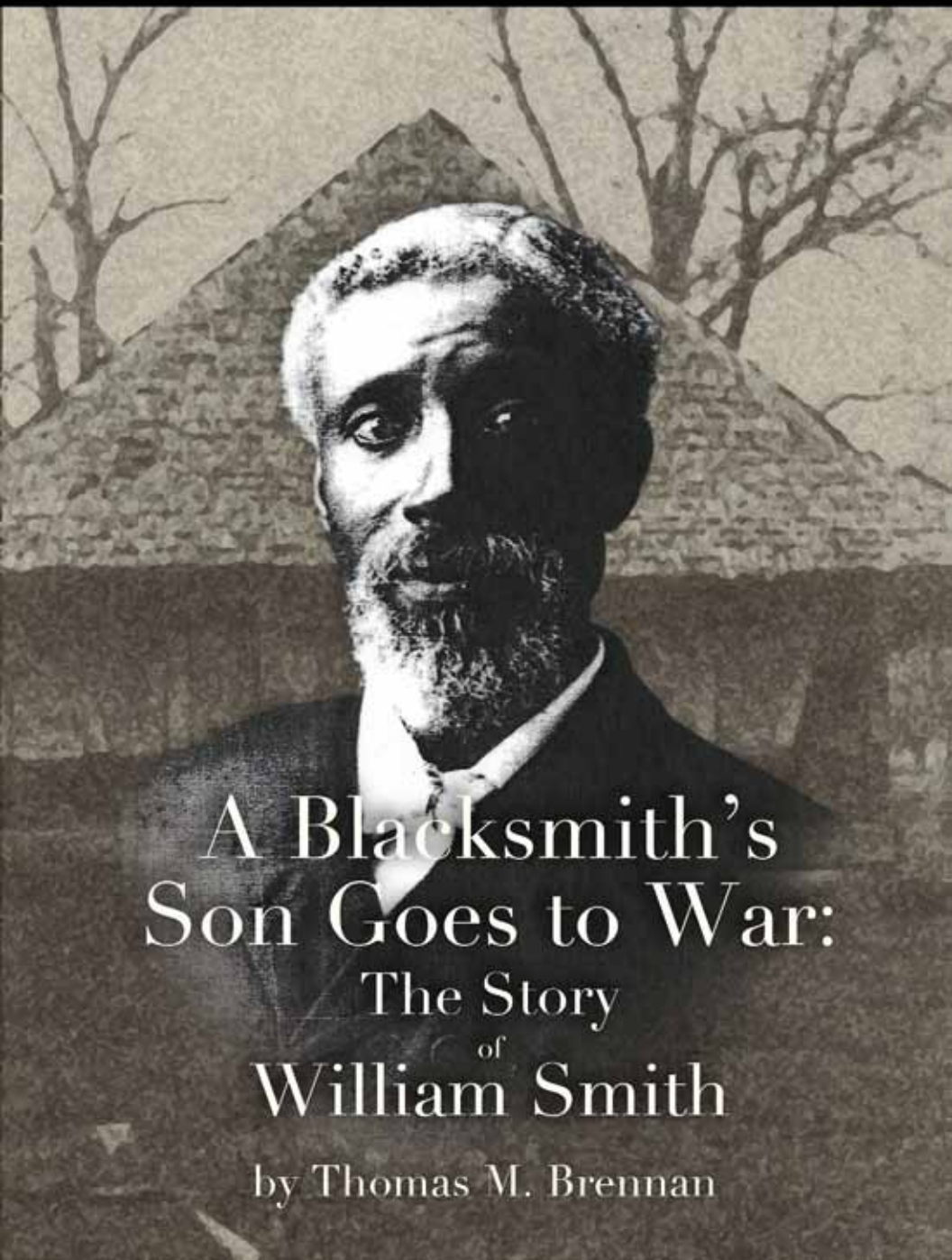

A Blacksmith's Son Goes to War: The Story of William Smith

by Thomas M. Brennan

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Front cover photograph: William Smith, c. 1900. Cane River Creole National Historical Park, Interview, CARI 35008 Resource Management Records Collection, Series III Ethnographic & Oral History Collections, Interview 6: Johnetta Golden Conway and members of the William Smith and Solomon Williams Family. November 25, 1997.

Front and back cover photograph: Oakland Plantation Blacksmith's Shop, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, CARI-143 Sandra "Sam" Prud'homme Haynie Collection

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Author's Forward

"I can't imagine."

Those words came out of my mouth and ran through my mind many times while researching William Smith's story. Conducting the research for this booklet was a journey into America's past, and the America I encountered was a very different place from that of 2015.

William Smith's story is not that of a prominent citizen. It's not the story of a mover or a shaker in society. There are no epic battles here, no great accomplishments, no stately homes, no grand heroics. Rather, this is the story of a man born into the worst kind of adversity who spent a lifetime struggling to be treated fairly and equally. It's a story of quiet, everyday heroics by an ordinary guy. It's also a story of the Civil War and the American frontier… of cowboys and Indians and the cavalry riding to the rescue. It's the story of a survivor.

I learned a lot about American history while writing this booklet, especially the history of the Texas frontier. I hope that I've been able to convey a sense of William Smith's life and times in this booklet, and I hope that you enjoy the story of William Smith—an extraordinary, ordinary man.

And… I hope that you can begin to imagine.

— Thom Brennan, March 2015

The man known in later years as William Smith was born sometime around 1843 or 1844 on Bermuda Plantation, located in Natchitoches Parish in central Louisiana.[i] William was the oldest of four children born to enslaved plantation blacksmith Solomon Williams and his second wife, Polly. It's uncertain what name William was given at birth and, like many of the enslaved, he was uncertain of his actual birth day and year. He took the name "William Smith" when he enlisted in the army in 1864.[1]

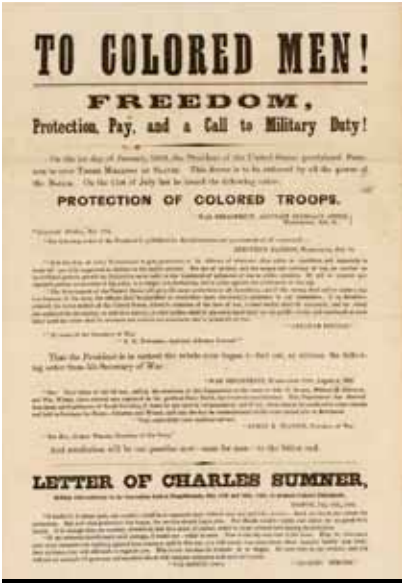
At Bermuda Plantation, William grew up surrounded by the back-breaking work of a cotton plantation. When he was a boy, he suffered a broken leg when a horse fell on him. As a result of this accident, he would walk with a slight limp for the rest of his life.[2] At some point prior to the Civil War, Phanor Prud'homme, the owner of Bermuda Plantation, and William's master, either sold William or gave him away. His new home was the nearby plantation owned by Phanor's older brother, Jean Prud'homme. There, William worked as a house servant.[3]

[i] Bermuda Plantation is now known as Oakland Plantation and is a part of Cane River Creole National Historical Park, located 12 miles southeast of Natchitoches, Louisiana.

The Civil War

When the Civil War broke out in April 1860, Americans of African descent found that the Militia Acts of 1792[ii] prohibited them from serving in the army.[4] The racial attitudes prevalent at the time also cast doubt on the fighting ability of black men, even though they had served honorably in all the country's previous wars. By 1862, the American government had changed its mind concerning the enlistment of black soldiers. Advances into Confederate territory by the Union Army were met by joyful slaves, eager to be free.[5] These freed slaves provided a ready source of manpower for a Federal army engaged in a brutal, protracted struggle.

The North also came to realize that slave labor lay at the heart of the Southern economy and war effort. Slaves worked in Confederate factories, farms and shipyards. They built fortifications for the Rebel armies, tended to the cavalry's horses, transported supplies, and performed camp duties. Each enslaved laborer employed by the South equaled one free white man who could serve on the firing


TO COLORED MEN!

FREEDOM,

Protection, Pay, and a Call to Military Duty!

PROTECTION OF COLORED TROOPS.

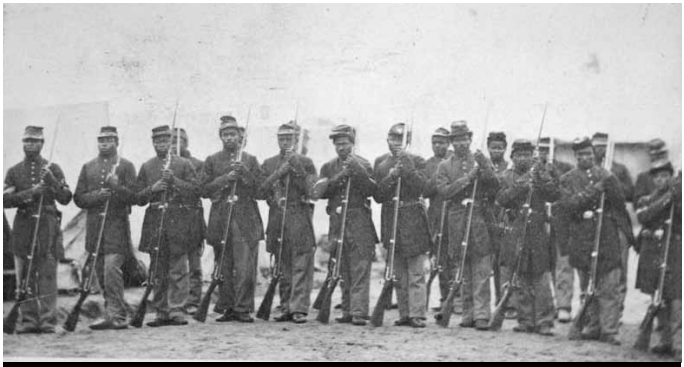
LETTER OF CHARLES SUMNER,

Recruiting poster for black troops (National Archives, Records of the Adjutant General's Office 1790–1917)

[ii] The Militia Acts of 1792 were passed in the wake of General Arthur St. Clair's crushing defeat by American Indians at the Battle of the Wabash in 1791. The acts conscripted all free white males between the ages of 18–45 into the militia. The southern states were fearful of a slave insurrection and wanted nothing to do with armed black men in their midst.

lines for the Confederacy. A slave captured or freed by the North would, in essence, result in the gain of two people for the Union cause—one added to the Union, and one denied to the Confederacy.[6]

On July 17, 1862, Congress revised the Militia Act of 1792 to allow men "of African descent" to serve. As the Union army moved into Confederate territory, hundreds, and eventually thousands of freedmen[iii] met them. Union recruiters found them a ready source of manpower, often obtaining enough recruits to fill an entire regiment. For the freedmen, Army life was the first chance they had to live their life on the same level as whites. They ate the same food, wore the same uniform, carried weapons, and shared the same hardships as white soldiers. As abolitionist Frederick Douglass put it, "Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship." [7]



Men of the Corps d'Afrique, ca. 1864 (National Archives, Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs)

[iii] A freedman is a person who was recently enslaved, but is now free. At the conclusion of the Civil War, the four million people enslaved in the United States were emancipated *en masse* and became freedmen.

The Confederacy reacted to the enlistment of black troops with alarm. In late 1862, Confederate President Jefferson Davis ordered the army to turn any captured black troops over to state authorities. They would then either be returned to slavery or put to death. A captured white officer commanding black troops would be tried for inciting a slave revolt, which was also punishable by death. The Confederate Congress passed joint resolutions in April and May of 1863, reinforcing Davis's directives.[8]

The Red River Campaign of 1864 saw the Union Army advance through the Cane River area of Louisiana, home to William Smith. Among those troops marching through was the Corps d'Afrique, black soldiers serving as engineers[iv]. After the Union defeat at the Battle of Mansfield, the Union retreated back towards Alexandria. William saw his chance for freedom and took it. He, along with another 100 or so enslaved workers, ran away from the plantation. The mere act of running away from the plantation took considerable courage. The penalties for those recaptured were severe—up to 150 lashes applied, followed by brine being poured in the resulting wounds.[9]

The dangers faced by escaping slaves weren't limited to simply being captured and re-enslaved. The Cane and Red River areas were an active war zone. Over 100 newly-freed slaves lost their lives when the Union transport *Champion No.3* was attacked by Confederate forces near the junction of the Cane and Red Rivers. The *Champion No. 3,* moving down-river and loaded with escaped slaves, was part of a five-ship flotilla consisting

[iv] Engineers are a type of military troop whose primary function is that of construction rather than combat. Engineers build fortifications, destroy enemy fortifications, bridge rivers, construct and repair roads, and remove obstacles from the army's line of advance.

of the gunboats *Cricket*, *Fort Hindman,* and the *Juliet* accompanied by the transport *Champion No. 5*. As the ships neared the confluence of the rivers, they came into view of Confederate forces along the river banks. The passengers on *Champion No. 3* were heard to be singing.[10] Rebel artillery opened fire on the ship causing the passengers to take shelter below deck in the boiler room. A cannon shot pierced one of the ship's boilers causing an explosion and scalding to death more than 100 newly-freed slaves.[11]

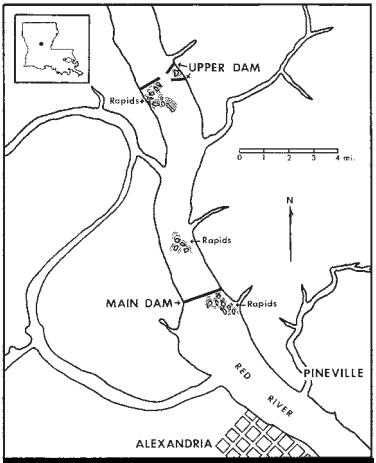
Fortunately, William Smith escaped safely and made his way to Alexandria, Louisiana, sometime around April 25, 1864. There, he found the Union Army of General Nathaniel Banks and became one of the more than 78,000 black Louisianans who enlisted in the Union Army during the war. Louisiana contributed more black troops to the Union cause than any other state, with almost one-third of black males aged 18–45 joining the Yankee army.[12] William enlisted in the 99th Regiment of Infantry, United States Colored Troops (USCT). The 99th had originally been a part of the Corps d'Afrique, one of the first black volunteer units in the Union Army.[13] Both the Corps and the 99th functioned as engineers, not infantry. William was issued a uniform and an old smooth bore musket.[14] The regular infantry were generally issued rifled muskets. The old smooth-bore was not, however, unusual as black troops were often given older equipment.

William soon may have wondered about the wisdom of his enlistment since, at that time, the Union Army was in dire straits at Alexandria. The surrounding countryside was a wasteland due to the scorched-earth tactics practiced by both sides. Rations were running short, fodder for the horses and mules was scarce, fresh drink-

ing water almost non-existent, and morale was low. Confederate forces surrounded the city, skirmishing daily with the Union pickets. To top it all off, a portion of the Union Navy's Mississippi Squadron under Admiral David Dixon Porter, which had accompanied Banks' army by traveling up the Red River in support, was trapped. Ten of Porter's largest ships—ironclads, monitors, and tinclads[v]—lay stranded at Alexandria due to low water levels in the Red River.[15]

Building Bailey's Dam on the Red River, 1864 (Library of Congress)

The Red River at Alexandria was spanned by rocky rapids. In normal times, there was enough water over the rocks for ships to pass safely. The spring of 1864, however, was not "normal times;" the weather being abnormally hot and dry. The result was that there was only three feet of water over the rapids in some places and even the smallest of Porter's gunboats drew seven feet of water. Unless a solution was found quickly, Banks would be forced to save his army by



Map showing the location of Bailey's Dam in relation to Alexandria during the Civil War. (Courtesy of the Louisiana Division of Archeology)

[v] A tinclad was a converted river steamer, used as a gunboat by the Union Navy on the western rivers. In spite of the name, they weren't armored with tin. They were lightly armored with iron or armored only with thick layers of wooden planking. They were both faster and cheaper than an ironclad warship.

abandoning Porter's navy. The ships would then have to be destroyed to keep them from the Confederates.[16]

Two engineering officers, Colonel Uri Pearsall of the 99th Regiment USCT (William's unit) and Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Bailey, had an idea. If temporary dams could be built across the Red, the water level might be raised enough to allow Porter's ships to shoot the rapids and escape. Pearsall and Bailey, who had constructed similar structures in the past, presented their case and were given permission to attempt the feat.[17]

On April 30, 1864, William and his fellow engineers of the 97th and 99th Regiments USCT began to construct a dam across the 758-foot-wide river, working out from the south bank of the Red. On the north side of the river, troops from Maine—many of whom had worked in the logging industry—chopped down trees to build out from that shore to meet them in the middle. Buildings were torn down in both Alexandria and neighboring Pineville (located across the river) to furnish construction materials. Stone, bricks, machinery, furniture… all were used to weight the cribs anchored in the river.[18]

The construction of what came to be known as Bailey's Dam became quite a spectacle. Thousands of the bored Union troops trapped in Alexandria sat on the banks of the river to watch the dam's progress. Many of them thought the whole project a great joke. The Confederates got wind of the scheme, and their pickets taunted the Yankees, asking "How's your big dam progressing?"[19]

USS Essex at Baton Rouge, July 1862. William Smith witnessed the Essex pass over Bailey's Dam. (Public domain)

Bailey's Dam, from Frank Leslie's Scenes and Portraits of the Civil War, 1894, pg. 402 (Public Domain)

The Herculean labors of the black engineers and the troops from Maine paid off and skeptics were silenced as the water level in the Red River behind the dam rose steadily. On May 9, a temporary plug in the dam unexpectedly gave way and water began to pour through the breach. Four Union warships, the *Osage, Lexington*, *Fort Hindman* and *Neosho* were able to raise steam and shoot the rapids before the pool behind the dam was emptied.[20]

Repairs began on the dam immediately with a second dam being constructed further upstream to alleviate the pressure on the main dam. By May 11, enough water had collected that the remainder of Porter's trapped ships could escape. On May 13, William witnessed the last of them, the *Essex*, pass over the rapids. All of this had been accomplished in a mere two weeks.[21]

With the Union Navy freed from their confinement above the rapids, Banks was free to resume the Army's retreat. By now, supplies were at a critical point and troops were drinking water wherever they could find it. To the accompaniment of the regimental bands, the Army left Alexandria, following the Red River's course towards Baton Rouge. Some of the Union troops—most

likely General A. J. Smith's westerners, who had a reputation as a rough and wild bunch—set fire to Alexandria. They did so on their own volition, having no orders to do so. Banks ordered the engineers of the 97th and 99th USCT to douse the fires. Due to the lack of water and the dryness of the structures, they were unsuccessful and Alexandria went up in flames.[22]

William, however, was not among those marching southwards. He had taken ill while in Alexandria and was told by the medical officer to ride in an ambulance. His gun and equipment were loaded into the company wagon and he began the slow journey. Along the way, he was forced to drink "bayou water" and he came down with what he called "pleurisy." Given the description of his symptoms, he most likely contracted dysentery.[23]

We don't know how long William was on the retreat with Banks' army. In later life, he gave two accounts regarding his experience on the march. In an 1880 deposition, he states he was on the retreat for "4 or 5 days." Twenty-six years later, he was less specific and only mentions a single night on the retreat. Of course, both depositions were given many years after the actual events; 16 and 42 years later, respectively. Human memory is often not precise.[24]

At the end of one day's ride in the ambulance, William tried to find the other soldiers in his company. Due to the thousands of soldiers encamped, he was unable to locate them and had to spend the night sleeping on the grass. The next morning, he was overtaken by Confederate soldiers either while riding in the ambulance, or marching along the road. Again, the stories Smith gave 28 years apart differ.[25]

When captured, William feared for his life "as I was told they killed all the Negro soldiers." William's fears were not unfounded, nor were the rumors he had heard exaggerated. Throughout the Civil War, there were incidents where black troops were executed upon capture. Casualty statistics show that it was much less common for black troops to be captured than for white troops. If black troops were found to be fighting on the Union's side in a battle, the Confederates would sometimes fight under the "black flag," indicating that no prisoners would be taken.[26]

William was questioned by his captors who inquired where his weapon was and why he was wearing a Union uniform. He replied that he had been waiting on a captain's table and the uniform had been given to him. The Rebel soldiers believed William's story, and he was taken to a farmer's house to recover from his illness. After a week or so, the soldiers returned and took William back to Jean Prud'homme's plantation, where he was again enslaved and labored for the remainder of the war. With the end of the Civil War, William regained his freedom and he moved to New Orleans sometime in 1865.[27]

The Ninth Cavalry

The Union Army downsized and restructured itself after the Civil War, with most troops returning to civilian life. In order to recognize the contribution nearly 200,000 black troops made to the Union victory, Congress on July 23, 1866, authorized the creation of two cavalry and four infantry regiments of black soldiers to be a part of the regular army. The officers for these units, however, were to be white, as they had been during the Civil War. The newly-created Ninth Cavalry Regiment[vi] was one of these units and army recruiters focused their efforts in the New Orleans area.[28]

Opportunities for a black man to find meaningful employment were slim in the post-war South. That was undoubtedly one of the factors enticing William to enlist in the Ninth. He did so on August 29, 1866, enrolling in A Company[vii]. At 5′ 7″ in height, William was an inch taller than the average Ninth trooper, and like all cavalry troopers, he weighed less than 155 pounds. This weight restriction was imposed by the army as the trooper's horse had to carry not only the soldier, but another 100 pounds or so of equipment as well. A heavier soldier simply placed too great a burden on his mount's stamina.[29]

[vi] Generally commanded by a Colonel and assisted by a Lieutenant Colonel, a full-strength regiment contained around 1000 men, although most regiments, especially in wartime, were rarely at full strength. The Ninth Cavalry regiment of William Smith's era comprised 12 companies of 73 men each, and the Ninth was authorized to be at 844 men if full-strength. In reality, the Ninth was *never* at full-strength during Smith's time with them.

[vii] A company is a military unit of roughly 100 personnel generally commanded by a Captain and assisted by one or more Lieutenants. The cavalry equivalent of a company is often called a Troop. During William Smith's time with the Ninth Cavalry, a full-strength Troop was authorized to have 73 men: 54 Privates, 4 Corporals, 5 Sergeants, 2 Trumpeters, 2 Farriers (who took care of the horses), 1 Saddler, 1 Wagoner, 1 Second Lieutenant, 1 First Lieutenant, and 1 Captain. Between the rigors of operations, illness and desertions, it was not unusual for a company or troop to be at half-strength.

Lacking barracks, the troops of the new unit were moved into an abandoned cotton-bale packing plant. Filthy, poorly ventilated and lacking any sort of cooking facilities (the men resorted to cooking over open fires), the plant was home to the Ninth when a cholera epidemic struck New Orleans in the fall of 1866. Not surprisingly, 29 of the troopers died. Another 30 deserted by the end of the year. William was one of those who stuck it out, neither falling ill nor deserting.[30]

While recruiters successfully attracted enlisted men to the Ninth, officers were another matter. Colonel Edward Hatch, the Ninth's commander, had organized all twelve companies of the regiment by February 1867. However, Hatch only had 11 of the 41 officers needed to command the unit. This chronic shortage of officers would plague the Ninth throughout William's service. Once officers were assigned, keeping them was another matter entirely. Of the 30 officers assigned to the Ninth in the unit's first six years, five were cashiered[viii], others resigned to escape disgrace or because of illness, and six died.[31]

[viii] An officer who was cashiered was removed from service and publicly disgraced, usually for misconduct. This sometimes involved a parade-ground ceremony in front of the troops, with the officer's rank insignia and medals being torn off his uniform and his sword broken.

The Texas Frontier

When Texas seceded from the Union in 1861, one of the reasons cited for secession was the inability of the Federal government to protect the Trans-Pecos[ix] frontier from Indian attacks.[32] Prior to the Civil War, fully one-quarter of the U.S. Army was stationed in Texas where they had established a series of military forts in an attempt to protect settlers and the U.S. mail.[33] Few American Indians actually lived in the Trans-Pecos but they frequently traversed it. Comanches, Kiowas, Mescalero Apaches and Lipan Apaches all journeyed from their home territories, crossing Texas into Mexico to raid for horses and livestock. Mexican Kickapoos traveled in the opposite direction, crossing the Rio Grande into Texas to raid. While the different native peoples sometimes skirmished with each other, they each violently resisted the incursion of the whites into their land and they had been doing so for more than a hundred years.

Frontier warfare has been described as "a blood feud between alien civilizations" with neither side believing the other was fully human.[34] To say that the warfare was brutal would be putting it mildly. Into this violent no-man's land of raid and counter-raid came the Butterfield Overland Mail Company. The company had been established under contract with the U.S. Postal Department in 1858 to provide mail service from the East to West Coasts. The Butterfield mail route to the west ran from San Antonio to El Paso, through the terri-

[ix] The Trans-Pecos is the area of Texas west of the Pecos River; it is sometimes called "far west Texas." The Trans-Pecos is the most arid and mountainous region of the state and is sparsely populated to this day. In William Smith's time, it was the frontier.

tory frequented and claimed by the Comanches, Lipans, Kickapoos, Kiowas and Mescaleros. Not surprisingly, the mail and stage coaches were constant targets of the Indians, along with the isolated ranches and settlements.[35]

One-fourth of the army may have been stationed in Texas, but they were still few in number and scattered across vast distances. The army had a nigh-impossible task guarding against the mounted, highly mobile native warriors who possessed an intimate knowledge of the land. *Their* land, as they saw it.

After Texas joined the Confederacy, the U.S. Army abandoned its forts in the Trans-Pecos. Confederate forces and Texas Rangers initially re-occupied the posts; but by late 1862 the forts had been abandoned. That left the Apaches in control of the area as the Comanches concentrated on warring with the United States in western Kansas, eastern Colorado, and eastern New Mexico. The forts themselves fell into ruin.

At the end of the Civil War, Texas was in chaos and racked by violence. Added to the violent pre-war mix of Indians, Mexicans and settlers, was now added the political instability of Mexico itself, resulting from the French takeover attempt of 1862.[x] Revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries crisscrossed the border area. Many Texans found it convenient to ignore the fact that they had lost the war, and they tried to continue their old way of life. The murder of pro-Union Texans was common, and criminal gangs and secret societies roamed the state,

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[x] The French, under Emperor Napoleon III, invaded Mexico in 1862. They were initially repulsed at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862 (celebrated today by Cinco de Mayo). Later battles were won by the French and they established the Second Mexican Empire. The resulting conflict lasted until 1867 when Mexican Republic forces regained control of their country.

terrorizing the black population into submission. As part of Reconstruction, the Federal government deployed troops to occupy the state but they found themselves unwelcome, to say the least.[36]

One of those deployed to help pacify Texas was none other than General George Armstrong Custer. Custer arrived in Texas accompanied by his wife, Libbie, in August 1865. Libbie later wrote of her time in Texas, "The lawlessness was terrible." Custer testified about his experience in Reconstruction Texas before a Senate committee in March 1866. "There is a very strong feeling of hostility toward the freedmen. It is of weekly, if not daily, occurrence that freedmen are murdered," he testified. When asked what he thought might happen to the freedmen if Texans were left to their own devices, Custer replied, "… they would inaugurate a system of oppression that would be equally as bad as slavery itself."[37]

William Smith likely helped in the construction of the jail at Fort Stockton (Photo by the author)

Indian Wars Combat Operations

The depiction of Indian Wars battles in television Westerns and Hollywood movies has been fraught with inaccuracies. For starters, the majority (54%) of combat in Texas was fought by the Buffalo Soldiers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, yet the troops depicted on the screen are almost invariably white. Most combat was a small unit affair with only a few dozen combatants in total and large–scale battles and operations were the exception. Not only that, but combat itself was somewhat of a rarity. A troop would conduct many operations and never catch sight of an Indian. A typical combat operation would be a long, boring horseback ride through hot, dry, dusty terrain with the threat of sudden danger all about, but never materializing. The Texas forts themselves served only as a logistical base for the troops occupying them; they weren't intended to be defensive positions and didn't even have perimeter walls.

Combat operations generally took one of several forms: scouting (also called movement to contact), pursuit, large-scale expeditions, escorts and point defense. Of these, the most common were the pursuit and the scout.

In a pursuit, the local army commander would receive word of a nearby Indian raid. He would then either dispatch a small unit or personally lead troops to the scene. Once there, the troops would gather intelligence and try to pick up the Indians' trail. After locating the trail, they would often track the natives for days and

Fort Stockton, ca. 1880. While this photo was taken some years after William Smith was stationed at the fort and the fort is larger, one can still get a sense of the loneliness and isolation. (Courtesy of Fort Davis National Historic Site, VA-107)

The situation in Texas was so bleak that General Philip Sheridan, in command of the Fifth Military District of Louisiana and Texas, rather famously said, "If I owned Texas and Hell, I would rent out Texas and live in Hell."[38]

The Federal government, as part of its Reconstruction policies, forbade citizens of Texas from organizing and bearing arms. The result was that the Mescaleros ruled the Trans-Pecos.[39] In 1866, during one period of a few weeks, newspapers recorded that 34 men had been killed by the Apaches in the relatively short distance between El Paso and Fort Quitman.[40] The resulting torrent of complaints, petitions and reports of Indian depredations eventually reached the

desk of General Sheridan. On October 8, 1866, he wired Governor Throckmorton of Texas that additional U.S. troops had been ordered to the state "…and that as much protection as we can possibly can give to the frontier, will be cheerfully given and that by early spring the frontier posts will be established."[41]

One of the units dispatched into this volatile mix of violence and racial animosity was the African-American Ninth United States Cavalry, along with William Smith.

The Ninth in Texas

On March 27, 1867, the Ninth left New Orleans embarked on steamers of the Morgan Line. Companies L & M were bound for Brownsville, Texas, located along the Rio Grande River. The remaining 10 companies, including William's A Company, were headed for Indianola, Texas. Once there, they disembarked and marched 150 miles overland to San Pedro Springs, near San Antonio, for further training before service on the Texas frontier.[42]

hundreds of miles. The pursuit continued until the raiders were engaged or the pursuit was abandoned. In some cases, the pursuit stopped at the Rio Grande River, as U.S. forces were not authorized to cross into Mexico. The Indians knew this and often made a beeline for the Rio Grande when pursued. These pursuit-type operations made up roughly 43% of the combat operations in Texas.

In a scout, a small cavalry unit would be sent out on a routine security patrol. Once leaving the fort, the unit would travel along known or likely infiltration routes, visiting watering holes, streams, and river fords. Combat would occur when the scouting force found a fresh trail and initiated a pursuit, or when they ran across an Indian war party. These type of operations accounted for about 36% of the combat.[71]

Historian Thomas Smith's work ***The Old Army in Texas*** **provides a description of a typical cavalry battle during William Smith's era:**

"In the grassy months between April and November a mounted army detachment of less than company strength, led by a lieutenant or captain, would conduct a routine patrol or scout of an area, probably without a local guide or scout. The patrol would have enough coffee, beans, and hardtack biscuits along to avoid starvation. This would have been one of two dozen patrols they had made without glimpsing an Indian. The detachment would come across a fresh Indian trail and follow and surprise the raiders, or unexpectedly meet a war party of twenty

or fewer Comanche or Lipan Apache. The officer would order a mounted assault before the Indians could split into small groups and race for every point of the compass. In the wild charge that ensued, the army unit would begin to fragment as small teams of soldiers chased small groups of Indians. The soldiers killed in these affairs often outraced the support of their comrades. After a while the officer would regain control of his unit but, because of the burden of recovered property, soldier casualties, or worn-out horses, he would elect not to follow up his tactical victory and pursue the Indians. He would then continue his patrol or return to his logistical base."[72]

Skirmishes such as the one described above took place on the Texas frontier more-or-less constantly for many years. These small-unit battles were rarely conclusive, with one side withdrawing or scattering before the other could claim a decisive victory. Even though there were few glorious victories, the threat to life and limb was very real to cavalry troopers like William Smith. It was irrelevant whether you fell fighting 10 hostiles or 200; you were just as dead. The constant skirmishing with the army, along with the destruction of Indian property, gradually ground the native forces down in a war of attrition. The Indians had few reserves; the army had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of supplies and soldiers. In the end, numbers were all that mattered.

On April 9, 1867, the Ninth was involved in a mutiny. Lieutenant Edward Heyl of E Company had become angry at the speed with which his orders were obeyed. In response, he ordered several troopers punished by hanging them by their wrists from a tree branch. While Heyl sat in a nearby saloon drinking, one of the men managed to free himself. Heyl discovered this when he returned from the saloon and, infuriated, he started to beat the man with the flat of his saber. Company A's First Lieutenant Seth Griffin was on duty as Officer of the Day. A sergeant and other troopers protested Heyl's barbaric treatment to Griffin, who tried to defuse the incident but it continued to escalate. When it was over, the sergeant was dead from a gunshot wound and Griffin lay mortally wounded from a saber cut to the head. He died a few days later.[43]

By twenty-first century standards, all the white officers of the Ninth Cavalry would be considered racists. Heyl, however, was in a class by himself. It speaks volumes of the racial attitudes com-

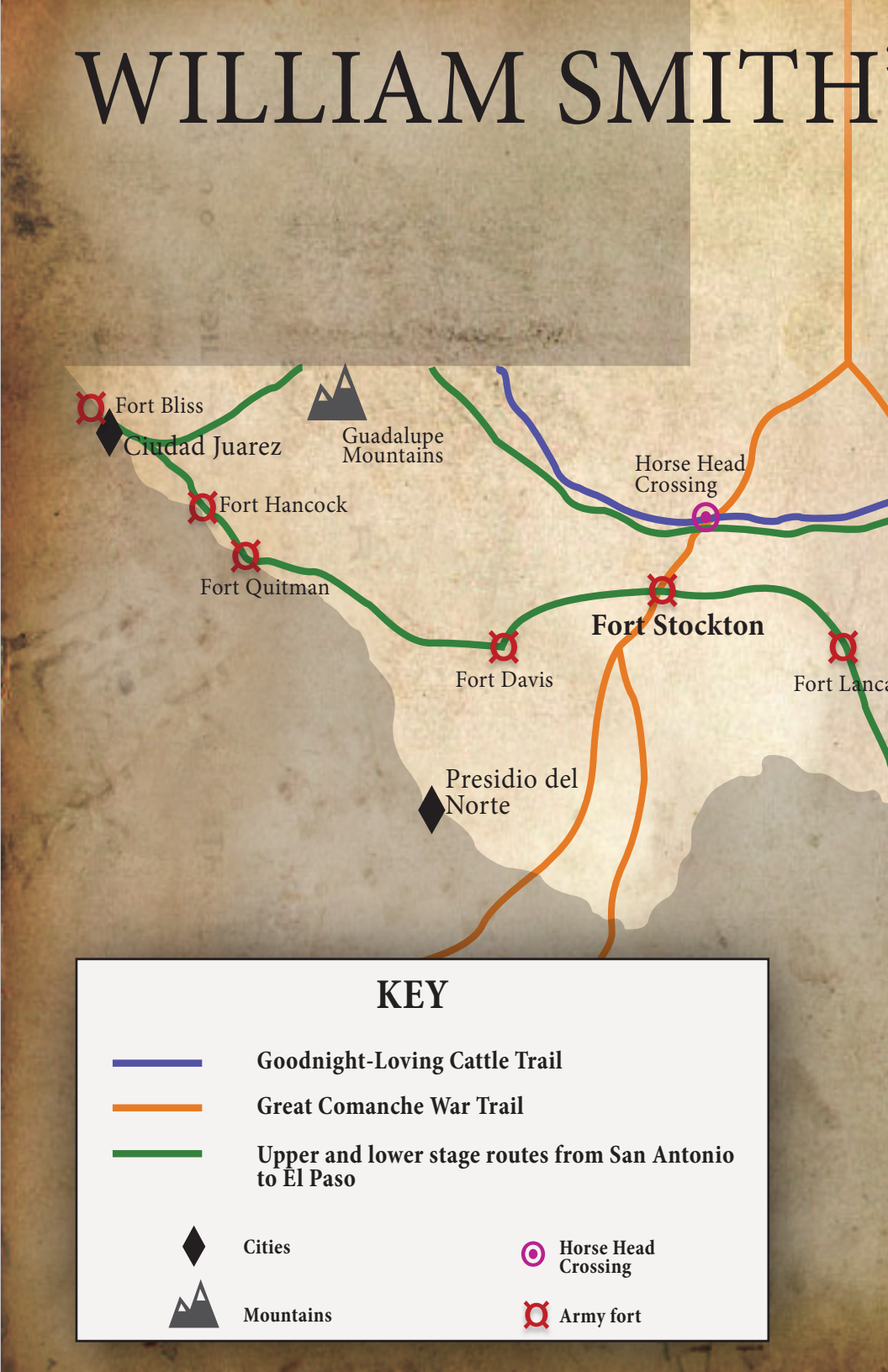
mon in 1867 to note two facts: Heyl, who was in command of black troops, later named his horse "Nigger"; and, he was never removed from the command of those black troops.[44]

In the wake of the E Company mutiny, William's A Company was once again without officers. Colonel Hatch requested more officers and the War Department finally listened and new officers gradually began reporting in to the Ninth. In May, Hatch received orders to deploy his mutinous, untried unit west to occupy Fort Stockton and Fort Davis. William, along with the rest of A Company, left San Pedro Springs on June 7, 1867, and arrived at the ruins of Fort Stockton on July 21.[45]

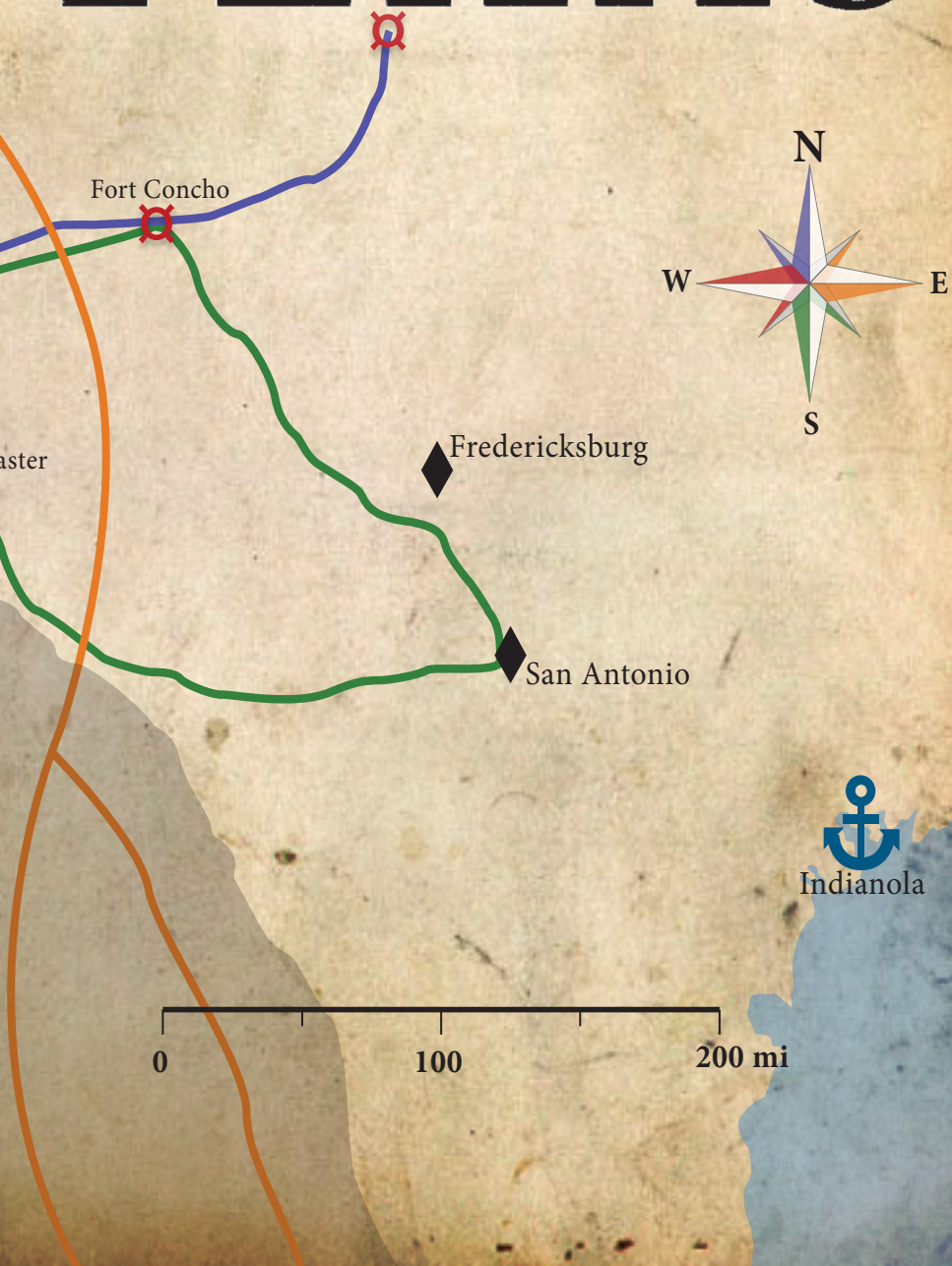
Fort Stockton was originally built in 1859 in a strategic location near Comanche Springs, one of the largest springs in all of Texas. The springs were a favorite stopping point for native raiders traveling the Great Comanche Trail to Chihuahua in Mexico. The trail itself was a series of well-defined paths used by the Comanches and Kiowas, following water sources from the Rio Grande River north, across Texas all the way to the Arkansas River. In places, the Great Comanche Trail was over a mile wide. The Goodnight-Loving Cattle Trail[xi] passed just north of Stockton and the fort was a major rest station on the San Antonio to El Paso stage and mail routes.[46]

[xi] The period immediately after the Civil War was the heyday of the classic American cowboy and cattle drives. Several cattle trails crisscrossed Texas, most following a south-to-north route. The Goodnight-Loving Trail ran east to west across Texas. It crossed the Pecos River at Horsehead Crossing, near Fort Stockton, and then followed the Pecos into New Mexico.

WILLIAM SMITH



'S TEXAS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When William Smith and companies A, B, E and K of the 9th Cavalry arrived at Fort Stockton, he must have felt he had journeyed to the ends of the earth. There was but a single, lone cottonwood tree in all the vicinity, the landscape being an arid plain. Fort Stockton itself did not have walls, as they weren't necessary. It was virtually impossible to surprise the garrison, as a hostile force approaching the fort would kick up so much dust that their approach could be seen while they were still many miles away. The nearest town was Presidio del Norte in Mexico, 147 miles to the southwest. The nearest American town of any size was Fredericksburg, Texas, 370 miles to the east, and the nearest railroad was 570 miles away. The remaining companies of the Ninth were stationed at Fort Davis, 74 miles to the southwest. And, of course, Fort Stockton itself was really non-existent, having fallen into ruins during the Civil War. Only the post trader's building was usable. In addition, the pre-war fort had been designed for a single company of troops, not the four companies of troops now assigned to it.[47] Along with the rest of his company, William pitched his tent on the fort's grounds. He would live in that tent for over two years, in a place where the average temperatures range from 33° in January to 94° in August.[48] Fortunately for the troops living in those tents, rainfall was scarce.

The troopers of the Ninth were immediately put to work rebuilding the fort. Corrals and privies were built, logs were cut and adobe bricks were manufactured. Perhaps in recognition of the mutiny, one of the first structures completed was the post jail. While half the troops were on construction detail, the remainder was detailed to protect the mail and stage runs, search for Indian raid-

ers, and to bring a semblance of law and order to the region. Indian raiders were so active it was found necessary to assign heavy guards to the horse herds at Fort Stockton to protect them from being run off. The detachments sent out to guard the mail stations and to scout the areas around the Pecos, Concho and Devils Rivers, as well as the San Antonio to El Paso Road were often in the saddle from dusk to dawn.[49]

In addition to hard work and poor quarters, the Ninth suffered a boring, monotonous diet, with the food often of poor quality. Rations consisted of coffee, bread, beans, and beef, with molasses, cornbread, and sweet potatoes added to spice up the evening meal. In July 1867, the beans that arrived at nearby Fort Davis were inedible even after "twenty-four hours of uninterrupted boiling" according to Colonel Wesley Merritt. Since the soldiers' diet included few vegetables, the Fort Stockton troops planted watercress in nearby Comanche Creek to harvest in an attempt to prevent scurvy (caused by a vitamin C deficiency).[50]

In October, 1867, the Ninth experienced its first combat losses when D Company's Corporal Samuel Wright and Private Eldridge Jones were killed near Howard's Spring while escorting the mail.[51]

The primitive conditions and inadequate nutrition had a deleterious effect on William's health and he spent much of the next six months in and out of the Fort Stockton post hospital. The word "hospital" was a euphemism as what Smith found himself in was just another tent; no hospital building had yet been constructed at Stockton even as late as June 1869.[52] From November 1867 until

May 1868, William was in and out of the hospital, suffering from maladies described as cold, pleurisy,[xii] "swelled leg left," rheumatism, pain, and scurvy.[53]

Conditions for settlers in the Trans-Pecos worsened in early 1868. Indian raiding increased while the Ninth was still largely occupied with fort-building. Of the 17 patrols they conducted from January to March of 1868, covering thousands of miles of inhospitable terrain, only two ever encountered Indians. On September 26, William's A Company battled natives in the Santiago Mountains.[54] The Ninth, along with William Smith, continued the routine of escorting mail and supply runs, scouting for Indians, and chasing white renegades.[55]

The year 1869 saw General E. R. S. Canby place the Trans-Pecos under martial law. This gave the military greater authority than the local civilian authorities. While the local settlers wanted the army to protect them from the Indians, they didn't want *black* troops to protect them. This was the not-so-old Confederacy: seeing a soldier in a blue uniform was bad enough; a black solider in a blue uniform was a strong and painful reminder of just how much the world had changed. "It is very hard," said a former Confederate soldier, "... to see a white man taken under guard by one of these black scoundrels." A newspaper editorial of the day proclaimed, "The idea of a gallant and high-minded people being ordered and pushed about by an inferior, ignorant race, is shocking to the senses."[56]

[xii] Pleurisy is a painful inflammation of the membranes surrounding the lungs and a common cause of pleurisy is pneumonia. In the author's opinion, it's likely that Smith had pneumonia. Scurvy is caused by a deficiency of vitamin C—found in fresh fruits and vegetables—in the diet. Common symptoms of scurvy are malaise and lethargy.

These racial attitudes, prevalent at the time, weren't limited to just words either. The African-American troopers of the Ninth were regularly subjected to harassment and arrest by local authorities and were even murdered. To the locals, it didn't matter how many cattle were safely escorted by the Ninth, how many stage runs were protected or how many thousands of miles they patrolled. The fact that the troopers routinely arrested desperadoes and rustlers too powerful for the local authorities to deal with was of no consequence. They were black troops and nothing they did could improve their image. In the words of one historian, "Texas simply was not a nice place for black troopers."[57]

Indian raids continued in 1869, with the Lipans and Kickapoos crossing the Rio Grande River from Mexico to steal horses and pillage. If pursued, they crossed the Rio Grande back into Mexico, where US troops were forbidden to follow.[58]

By 1869, William had been promoted to Corporal. Sometime, probably early in the year, he was hospitalized again at Fort Stockton suffering from rheumatism and defective vision "caused by exposure while fighting Indians."[59] He was also sick with another bout of pleurisy and scurvy. After about six months of illness, he returned to duty.[xiii] During October and November, Corporal Smith and Trooper I. Mitchell were detailed to guard the mail route.[60]

[xiii] William Smith provided the date of 1869 for these maladies in his pension application of 1902. The description of his ailments closely matches the hospital records from 1867. Given that his pension application was completed some 30-plus years after the events, it is entirely possible that the 1867 and 1869 periods of illness are one and the same, and that they occurred in 1867.

Decades of Hollywood movies might lead one to believe life in the West was pretty exciting. Not so. Life in the Trans-Pecos of William Smith's time would have been incredibly boring but for the presence of the Indians. Isolation, the lack of civilized comforts, a monotonous diet and an abundance of hard physical labor were constant companions. As one historian put it, "The West was not dull, it was stupendously dull, and when it was not dull it was murderous. A man could get killed without realizing it. There were flash floods, weird snakes, and God Himself did not know what else, along with Indians descending as swiftly as the funnel of a tornado."[61]

By 1870, the army had largely completed rebuilding the Trans-Pecos forts (Stockton, Davis and Quitman). Troops could now be spared to aggressively pursue the Indians and take the war to them. On January 20, Colonel Dodge led almost 200 Ninth Cavalry troopers from companies A, C, D, H, I and K northwest to the Guadalupe Mountains of southern New Mexico, the heart of Mescalero country.[62]

William left Fort Stockton on April 4, as one of 30 troops on an extended scout commanded by Second Lieutenant Martin Hughes. They rode the 90 miles to Fort Davis where they joined forces with other troopers of the Ninth under Major Albert Morrow. The combined force then headed northwest another 140 miles or so, back to the Guadalupe Mountains in search of the Mescaleros. For almost two months, William and his comrades searched the canyons of the Guadalupe Mountains. The rugged terrain often necessitated the troopers dismounting and proceeding on foot, to save the horses.

While the Indians themselves successfully eluded the cavalry, the troopers discovered and destroyed "187 robes and six months' provisions" along with capturing native horses and mules.[63] Many of the troopers literally marched themselves out of their boots and they had to fashion makeshift moccasins in the field. William returned to Fort Stockton from the extended scout on June 15, 1870, after covering 950 miles in two months.[64]

By September of 1870, in addition to the jail, Fort Stockton boasted three adobe barracks so the troops were no longer required to sleep in tents. The hospital was now housed in an old officer's quarters while a new hospital building was being constructed. The fort also had a bakery, but there was still no church, library or school. As late as 1878, the sanitary facilities for the troops at Stockton were still regarded as "totally inadequate."[65] Troops had to bathe in Comanche Springs; they were required to do so at least once per week.[66]

A settlement of sorts had also grown up near the fort. Like most settlements near frontier forts, many of the commercial establishments sought to part troopers from their hard-earned money and appealed to their baser instincts: bars, brothels and laundries were common. Also in September 1870, organized religion finally came to Fort Stockton, when a Catholic chapel was erected.[67]

March of 1871 found William assigned to Fort Lancaster, located some 80 miles to the east of Fort Stockton. Lancaster served as an outpost for the garrison at Stockton and, like Fort Stockton, was situated along the San Antonio to El Paso stage and mail routes.[68]

William Smith's five-year enlistment expired on August 29, 1871. Shortly before that, he was reduced in rank from Corporal back to Private. In his own words, the reason was "…something about leaving guard to go to a sporting house."[xiv] [69]

William had spent most of those five years stationed in one of the loneliest, most isolated military posts in the country, eating poor food and with inadequate shelter. His health suffered and he had neither been on extended leave nor seen home in five years. It is not surprising that William, like many of the initial Ninth Cavalry troopers, chose not to re-enlist. He was discharged from the army at Fort Stockton, Texas, on August 29, 1871.[70]

After the Army

After discharge, William traveled to San Antonio, where he lived "for a couple of years." He then moved to Galveston where, in later years, another harrowing adventure awaited him.

On February 1, 1876, William married Mary Edinburgh in Galveston. Children came soon after: Junius, the first of William and Mary's seven children, was born June 2, 1877.

On May 29, 1880, William applied for a $300 bounty due him from his Civil War enlistment in the 99th USCT. The "Application of Discharged Soldier, Colored, for Pay and Bounty" displays two items of interest. The first is a note indicating that colored troops were routinely paid $7 per month, rather than the $13 paid their white com-

[xiv] "Sporting house" is a euphemism for a brothel or bordello.

rades-in-arms. The second is that William's mark appears on the application, rather than his signature. In theory, all troops were provided with educational opportunities while serving with the army. The reality, especially for black troops, was quite different. The regimental chaplain was tasked with providing the education, but frontier units like the Ninth Cavalry were split up among several forts. The troops rarely saw the chaplain even if he was inclined to provide the education required, and that was not always the case.[73] Thus, William appears to be illiterate as of 1880.

William's second son, William Hamilton Smith (June 2, 1879–February 17, 1930) followed in his father's footsteps by also enlisting in the Ninth Cavalry. A surviving report shows William Hamilton joining B Company of the Ninth on February 24, 1902. In the enlistment report, William Hamilton's record lists his occupation as "photographer" and his place of residence as Galveston. We have one surviving portrait photo of William Smith, the elder, thought to be taken in Galveston around 1900. It is likely that William's portrait was taken by his son.

Family history says that William Hamilton participated in the American storming of San Juan Hill on July 1, 1898, during the Spanish-American War.[74] His service record notes military service prior to his 1902 Ninth Cavalry enlistment, serving with the "XX 9 Vols.[xv] with a discharge date of May 25, 1899.[75] Since the Ninth U.S. Cavalry participated in the San Juan Hill battle[xvi], it seems probable that William Hamilton was indeed there.

[xv] The "XX" is used here as a placeholder, as the exact wording in the original document is illegible.

[xvi] Teddy Roosevelt and his Rough Riders are famous for their charge up San Juan Hill. In reality, Roosevelt actually charged up nearby Kettle Hill as a part of the overall battle located along the San Juan Heights. Roosevelt's charge was in support of the 3rd and 10th Cavalry (dismounted). The 9th (also dismounted) was one of the units that actually went up San Juan Hill.

William and his family were living in Galveston on that fateful day of September 8, 1900, when Galveston was struck by the deadliest hurricane in U.S. history. The storm brought a 15-foot storm surge to a city where the highest point of land was less than nine feet above sea level. When it was over, the storm had destroyed over 3,600 homes and killed between 6,000 and 12,000 people.[76] Caught in the storm surge, William's wife, Mary, supported her infant daughter and kept her from drowning. Somehow, William, Mary, and their children all survived but they lost some, if not all, of their possessions including William's discharge papers.[77]

Mary & William Smith, date unknown, but probably around 1915 (Photo courtesy of Reginald Smith)

In March 1902, William and his family moved to Beaumont, Texas.[78] He had apparently been in ill health ever since his service with the Ninth. On April 22, 1902, he filed for an invalid pension from the government based on his Indian Wars service. The standardized language on the application states "…that he is now disabled from obtaining his subsistence by manual labor, by reason of his disabilities, above described, incurred in the service of the United States." William listed his occupation as a drayman[xvii] and based his application on his illness and hospitalization while stationed at Fort Stockton. By now, he had apparently learned to write, as his signature in a shaky hand appears on the application.[79] Whether the shakiness was due to age (William was almost 60) or infirmity, we will never know. His application was denied.

William continued to fight for the bounty and his pension. On November 2, 1906, he gave a lengthy deposition detailing his early life and his military service, primarily with the 99th USCT. The bounty and pension had still not been granted in 1917 when William completed a questionnaire from the Bureau of Pensions on his Indian Wars service. Now some 73 years old, he said he did yard work "when able," and weighed 130 pounds.[80]

[xvii] A drayman was the driver of a dray, a low, flat-bed wagon pulled by horses or mules.

William's fourth son, Louis Charles (born Dec. 11, 1885), served in the U.S. Army during World War I. His experience seems to have been typical of African-American soldiers during that war. Most served only in support roles and were denied the right to serve in combat. According to family history, Louis was not issued a gas mask and he returned home from the war seriously injured from inhaling mustard gas. Arriving back in Beaumont after the war, Louis was exposed to the rampant racism of the time. He may have been a veteran in a uniform, but the locals didn't like the idea of a black man in a uniform any more than they did in William's time 50 years earlier. After hearing statements like, "Niggers, you been in those uniforms long enough. Now get out of them," the Smiths had had enough. William, Louis and the whole family packed up and moved to Monterey, California.[xviii] This would have been around 1920.[81]

Louis Charles Smith, around 1918 (Photo courtesy of Joyce Dorsey Hackett)

[xviii] Part of the Ninth Cavalry, along with William Hamilton Smith, had been stationed at the Presidio of Monterey, California, from 1902 to 1904. The troopers stationed there broke wild horses for use by the remainder of the Ninth as cavalry mounts. After discharge, some of the Ninth troopers remained in Monterey or relocated there. Among them was William Hamilton. Both he and his younger brother, Louis Charles, were living in Monterey by 1910. William Smith's children—William Hamilton Smith, Louis Charles Smith, and the Rev. Wellington Smith—would go on to play major roles as religious and civil rights leaders in the Monterey area.

William's family remembers him in his old age as a quiet man, given to drink occasionally. William's wife Mary, who he called "Mae," was the ruler of the house. William entertained his grandchildren by telling stories and singing old marching songs, often in broken French. He never talked about his years of enslavement.[82]

He finally won his long battle with the government for a pension when, on April 16, 1931, the Veterans Administration granted Private William Smith, Troop A, Ninth United States Cavalry, a pension of $50 per month, retroactive to December 1, 1930. William was now 88 years old and had been discharged from the army for almost 60 years.

Shortly thereafter, on December 27, 1931, William Smith died in Monterey, California, where he is buried. Mary Smith received a widow's pension of $32 per month, starting in January 1932. She continued to collect William's pension until her own death on January 23, 1943.[83]

Notes

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[3] William Smith, "Application of Discharged Soldier, Colored, for Pay and Bounty," December 2, 1880.
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[5] John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1963), 237.
[6] Ida Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy & Leslie S. Rowland, ed., *Freedom's Soldiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3–5.
[7] Joseph Glatthaar, *The Civil War's Black Soldiers* (Eastern National Parks and Monument Association, 1986), 35-36, and T. Allen, 222.
[8] ibid, 49.
[9] Cane River Creole National Historic Park (CARI), CARI Resources Management Records, CARI 0001, "The Cane River Insurrection," and Smith, Deposition A.
[10] Confederate soldier James A. Jarratt, quoted in Gary D. Joiner, ed., *Little to Eat and Thin Mud to Drink* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 24.
[11] Gary Dillard Joiner, *One Damn Blunder From Beginning to End* (Lanham: SR Books, 2003), 149.
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[19] Smith and Castille.
[20] Winters, 370.
[21] Smith, Deposition A.
[22] Winters, 373, and Mitcham, 282.
[23] Smith, Application, and Deposition A.
[24] Smith, Application.
[25] Smith, Deposition A.
[26] Smith, Deposition A, and Glathaar, 49–50.
[27] Smith, Deposition A.
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[29] Smith, Deposition A, and Kenner, 14.
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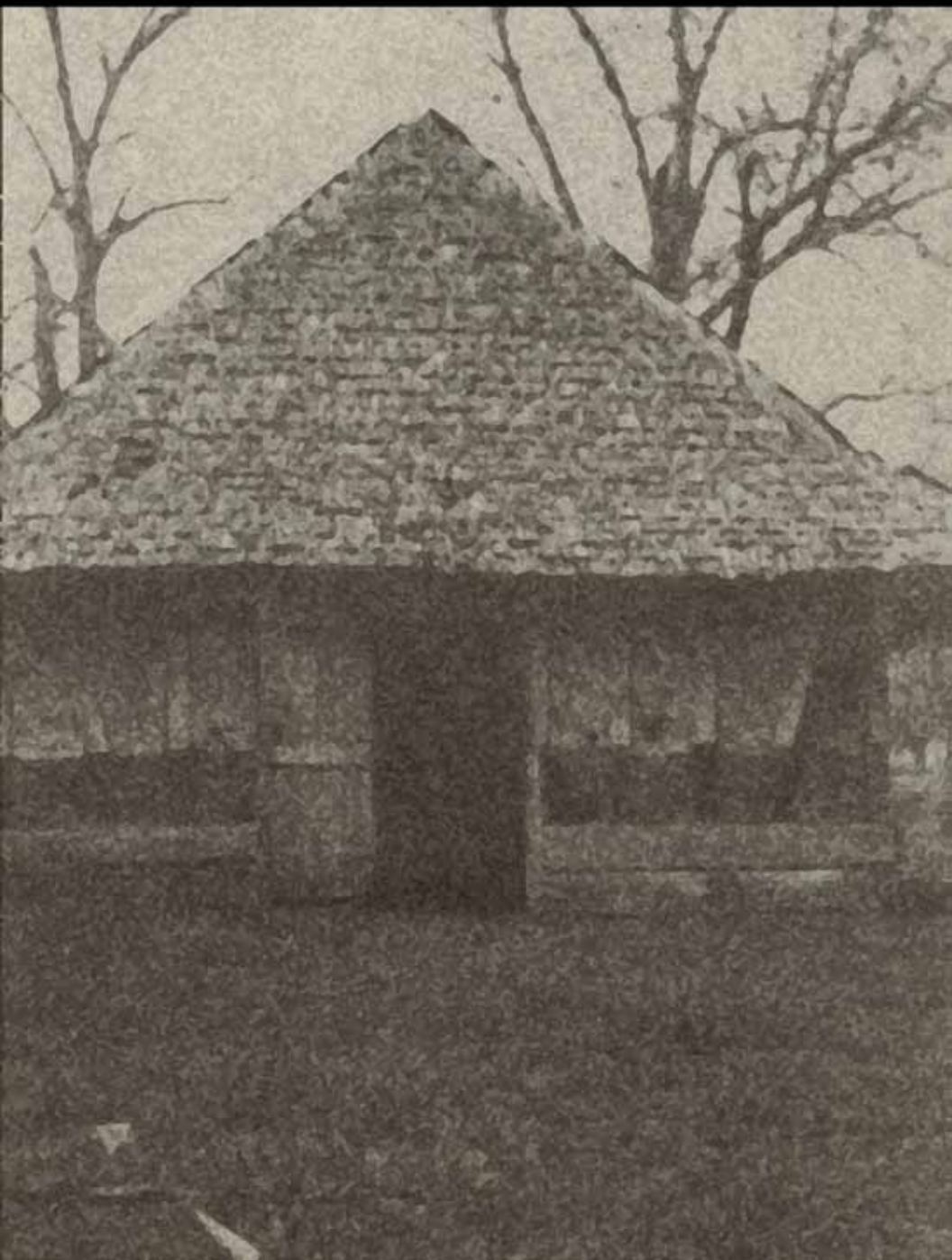
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