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FEATURED

Descendants of Nogales Buffalo Soldiers plan tribute

Events will kick off Black History Month here in 2022

By Manuel C. Coppola • Nogales International

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Members of the Nogales Buffalo Soldiers Legacy Association join city officials after trekking through Nogales last Wednesday. Top row, from left: Lonnie Jones, Dene Wallace, Rebecca Lynch and Ashlee Lynch. Bottom row, from left: Deputy City Manager John Kissinger, Angel Lynch, Donna Jackson-Houston, Richard Jackson, Rayette Jackson, Mayor Arturo Garino and Councilman Saulo Bonilla.

Photo by Manuel C. Coppola

Students attending schools in Nogales and Santa Cruz County are likely to know more about Spanish explorers like Francisco Vasquez de Coronado and Juan Bautista de Anza than about the Black soldiers stationed at Camp Stephen D. Little in Nogales.

There are no commemorative markers for Camp Little nor the Buffalo Soldiers who played an important role in Nogales' history. While local educators say the subjects may have come up during individual history lessons, these subjects were never taught as part of the curriculum.

A group of descendants of Nogales Buffalo Soldiers and others have been working to change all that. They came to Nogales last Wednesday and visited various points of interest, including the Nogales City Cemetery, where many of those soldiers are interned.

They participated in the regular meeting of the mayor and city council, where they outlined their plan of action, including a weekend of special events early next year. A welcome reception on Friday, Jan. 28 will be followed the next day by an unveiling of an exhibit at the Pimeria Alta Historical Society Museum, and then a reunion of family and friends at the cemetery. Fittingly, Black History Month begins the following day.

Leading the charge for the organizing group known as Nogales Buffalo Soldiers Legacy Association is Donna Jackson-Houston, granddaughter of Nogales Buffalo Soldier Lucius Franklin Monroe Jackson, Sr. and niece to former Nogales Vice-Mayor John Jackson, the first Black person elected to the City Council. At her request, Mayor Arturo Garino assured Jackson-Houston that he will draft a proclamation declaring Jan. 29 to be Nogales Buffalo Soldier Day.

The association partnered with the Pimeria Alta Historical Society on the inaugural Nogales Buffalo Soldiers Exhibit. It will highlight the lives of the soldiers who were based at Camp Little, many of whom went on to live and raise families in Nogales.

Buffalo Soldiers were members of the all-Black segregated units of the U.S. Army who served in both the Infantry and Cavalry from 1866 until 1947, when the military was desegregated.

The Buffalo Soldiers of the 10th Cavalry were stationed at Camp Little, which sprawled over areas along Western Avenue, including what is now A.J. Mitchell School and up toward the Anza Drive neighborhood. They and their white compatriots, who were also stationed at Camp Little, played a key role in the Battle of Ambos Nogales.

Three-part saga

Conflicts flared in Nogales during the so-called Border Wars that ended in U.S. victory in August 1918, when the 25th Infantry of the Buffalo Soldiers were deployed to the area in response to fierce fighting that had broken out for a third time, according to local artist David Fernandez, who has been researching and pouring over old newspaper articles about the camp and the soldiers for more than three years.

There were actually three confrontations comprising the Battle of Ambos Nogales – one in 1913, a second in 1915 and the third in 1918, he said.

An article he dug up published by the Border Vidette on Nov. 27, 1915 after the second battle underscored the volatility and tensions at the time.

According to the story, the firefight started “when a drunken (Gen. Pancho) Villa officer deliberately fired across the line from the drugstore opposite the Sonora depot. Immediately after the Mexican officer fired, he lay dead with a dozen American bullets in his body.”

The third battle sounded more like a free-for-all. It involved Mexican soldiers, Mexican Customs guards, residents of Nogales, Sonora, U.S. soldiers and residents of Nogales, Ariz., the Border Vidette reported in August, 1918.

Nogales Buffalo Soldiers proved instrumental in protecting the United States from further incursions. A salute to those men stationed at Camp Little from 1910-1933 is only fitting, Jackson-Houston said.

School segregation

Integral to the Nogales Buffalo Soldier history is the Grand Avenue/Frank Reed School that operated from 1928 to 1952 for Black children, including those whose parents were soldiers assigned to the camp. In 1996, the Jackson family donated a plaque to pay tribute to the school and placed it at a site on Grand Avenue and Santa Cruz Street now designated a historical monument. The museum exhibit will also acknowledge the school.

Dene Wallace, daughter of Mildred Bennet, a teacher at the school in the 1940s, spoke under the Call to the Public part of the city’s agenda last Wednesday. She said she was there to honor her mother, who “saw the inequities of a divided community and helped fulfill the vision of an educated community not separated, not segregated into different schools for minority children.”

Education and knowledge is critical to preserving culture and history, Jackson-Houston said. In fact, it was a 2005 article she read by former reporter George McQueen in the Nogales International that proved “pivotal” in her own education about her past.

“Prior to reading McQueen’s article, I had never heard that my grandfather was a Buffalo Soldier,” she said. “My family, like many others, incorrectly thought that only the Calvary soldiers were Buffalo Soldiers. My grandfather served in the Infantry. It was this amazing historical fact that started my journey to research the Buffalo Soldiers, educate my family and other descendants of the Buffalo soldiers stationed at Camp Little and the community of Nogales and beyond.”

“This is part of American history,” she said.

For more information, see NogalesBuffaloSoldiers.org.