

# Theatre IV

## CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE



### *Buffalo Soldier*

by Bruce C. Miller

#### PLAY SYNOPSIS

The story of the segregated African American troops who served our country is told through the eyes of Jones Morgan, a 109 year old African American buffalo soldier who, in 1990, was found living in poverty in Richmond, Virginia. A key element of Mr. Morgan's final years, and of this play, is the disagreement among reasonable people as to whether the events portrayed in this play are fact or fiction. The action of the play moves back and forth from Jones Morgan's memories of the Spanish American War (1898), to the events of his final years in Richmond, Virginia and his attendance at the dedication of the Buffalo Soldier Monument in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (1989 through 1993).

The son of freed slaves, Mr. Morgan was the oldest living buffalo soldier in the nation. Even with his memory fading, Mr. Morgan's life story is the stuff of legend. His story tells how he ran away to become a buffalo soldier in 1898 at the age of 15. Many people call Jones Morgan crazy, but two extraordinary people, a wheelchair bound Army reservist from Hawaii and an inner city boy from Richmond, join forces to learn the truth about Jones Morgan.



# Buffalo Soldier

## BACKGROUND: HISTORY OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS

**A**t the beginning of the Civil War, the North expected the conflict to end quickly and was not prepared for the high death toll that the long war brought about. The government soon turned to the African-Americans and asked them to join the fight. More than 150,000 men enlisted in all-black regiments in the Union Army. While a few of these men achieved officers' rank during the Civil War they were never allowed to command troops as the nation's leaders believed they lacked the needed skills and experience. By war's end, these skillful soldiers had taken part in over 400 battles and had helped the North preserve the Union.

Soon after the Civil War ended many settlers headed west to the American frontier. At the same time, the federal government set about taming the frontier by force, and soldiers were dispatched to the West. Among these soldiers were four newly formed black regiments which had been created by Congress on July 28, 1866 through legislation which allowed blacks to join the Army during peacetime for the first time.

These regiments were soon to be known as Buffalo Soldiers, a name given to them by the Indian warriors they fought. There are several stories to explain this nickname. According to one story, the black soldiers wore furry buffalo hides in the winter. All wrapped up with their dark skin and curly hair, they reminded the Indians of buffalo. Another story says that Native Americans admired the soldiers bravery just as they admired the strong and plentiful buffalo. The soldiers accepted this name with pride and the 10th Cavalry even included the buffalo in its regimental crest.

The four new black regiments were the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th and 25th Infantry, two units of foot soldiers. White officers were assigned to serve with these regiments because the Army would not permit black officers. According to the law establishing the peacetime army, the black regiments were to be composed of men who "had served two years during the Civil War and had been distinguished for capacity and good conduct in the field." Eventually, these regiments included 12, 500 newly enlisted black men and offered them steady pay, food and shelter, all of which were not easy to come by. Each enlistment was for a five-year term and paid \$13 a month.

While the Buffalo Soldiers original assignment was to guard the American frontier, they went on to become valued servicemen in the Spanish-American War, the Philippines, World Wars I and II, and the Korean War. During the first years of the Buffalo Soldiers, fighting the Indian Wars, eighteen black soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for Gallantry. On February 2, 1948, President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 ordering an end to segregation in the United States Armed Forces and ending the long and honorable service of the segregated troops known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

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## **HISTORY OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS** (continued)

The Buffalo Soldiers seemed to be the forgotten heroes of the American Army until 1982 when General Colin Powell was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. During this time, he noticed that the only monuments to the brave soldiers were two alleyways named 9th and 10th Cavalry Streets and a stained glass windows in the chapel. Powell began the project to create the Buffalo Soldier Monument. When Powell left Fort Leavenworth, Commander Carlton Philpot of the U.S. Navy took over the project. On July 25, 1992, Col. Powell returned to Fort Leavenworth to unveil the Buffalo Soldier Monument. Jones Morgan was in attendance at this ceremony. In 1994, the United States Postal Service honored the Buffalo Soldier with the creation of a .29 cent stamp featuring a Buffalo Soldier on horseback.

## **BACKGROUND: BUFFALO SOLDIERS AND THE SPANISH AMERICAN WAR**

In 1898 the 9th and 10th Calvaries and the 24th and 25th Infantries, the Buffalo Soldiers, fought in the Spanish-American War in Cuba. The 10th Cavalry, of which Jones Morgan was a member, eventually fought in one of the most important battles of the war and saved Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders during this Battle of San Juan Hill.

In the 1890s, Cubans were struggling to become independent from their Spanish rulers, claiming that they were unjust and cruel. During this time, the United States sent the battleship *U.S.S. Maine* to Havana Harbor in Cuba on a "friendly" visit. The ship was also there to help evacuate Americans from Cuba if heavy fighting should break out. At 9:40 a.m. on February 15, 1898, a large explosion sank the *Maine* killing 260 crew members. Although no one knew the real cause of the explosion, Spain was blamed and by April the United States and Spain were at war.

The Buffalo Soldiers traveled to Tampa, Florida, where they boarded ships for Cuba. On June 22, they arrived in Cuba. The 10th Cavalry joined the Rough Riders in the hills named Las Guasimas. The Rough Riders were a group of young cowboys, adventurers, and wealthy young men led by Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, who knew little about fighting wars. While making their way through the jungle trees, the Rough Riders came under heavy gunfire from the Spanish sharpshooters. The highly trained and skilled Buffalo Soldiers came to their rescue.

On July 1, the Buffalo Soldiers and the Rough Riders fought and won the most important battle of the Spanish-American War, the battle of San Juan and Kettle Hills. The Buffalo Soldiers were once again needed to save the untrained Rough Riders. For their service and bravery in this battle, five Buffalo Soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for Valor.

On July 3, the U.S. Navy defeated the Spanish naval squadron in Santiago's harbor. Two weeks later, Spain sought peace with the United States.

# Buffalo Soldier

## BACKGROUND: A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

- 1770 On March 5, Crispus Attucks, a former slave, is among the first to die in the "Boston Massacre"
- 1776-1781 7,000 African-American soldiers and sailors take part in the Revolutionary War.
- 1862-1865 186,000 African-American soldiers serve in black regiments during the Civil War; 38,000 black soldiers lose their lives in more than 400 battles.
- 1866-1890 Units of black soldiers, referred to as Buffalo Soldiers, are formed as part of the U.S. Army.
- 1872 On September 21, John H. Conyers becomes the first African American admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy.
- 1914-1918 More than 400,000 African Americans serve in the U.S. armed forces during the First World War.
- 1918 On May 15, two black soldiers, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, become the first Americans to receive the French Medal of Honor (Croix de Guerre).
- 1940 Benjamin O. Davis, Sr., becomes the first African-American general in the active Regular Army.
- 1941-1945 American forces in World War II include more than a million African-American men and women.
- 1948 On February 2, President Harry S. Truman signs Executive Order 9981, ordering an end to segregation in the U.S. armed forces.
- 1950-1953 Black and white forces fight side by side in Korea as separate black fighting units are disbanded.
- 1965-1973 Twenty African-American soldiers are awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War.
- 1971 On April 28, Samuel L. Gravely becomes the first black admiral in the history of the U.S. Navy.
- 1975 In August, Daniel "Chappie" James becomes the first African-American to achieve the rank of four-star general.
- 1989 On October 3, Colin Powell becomes the first African-American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

# Buffalo Soldier

## QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

1. Many Buffalo Soldiers participated in military actions designed to drive Native Americans off their homeland. Discuss the parallels in the history of Native Americans and African-Americans, particularly in regard to their loss of freedom.
2. The legend of the Buffalo Soldiers was kept alive for many years by Jones Morgan, who told his story to anyone willing to listen. Many family histories are also kept alive orally. Have students share family histories of their own with the class.
3. African-Americans have willingly taken part in every major American war, battle and campaign. Have students research the specific role that African-Americans played in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and Persian Gulf War.
4. The era of the Buffalo Soldier ended with the desegregation of the armed forces in 1948. Discuss how this may have influenced or reflected the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

## ADDITIONAL READING

*An Album of Black Americans in the Armed Forces* by Donald L. Miller

*Black Fighting Men in U.S. History* by Edward Wakin

*Buffalo Soldiers* by Catherine Reef

Theatre IV is the second largest theatre for young audiences in the nation and is the Children's Theatre of Virginia. We encourage your comments about *Buffalo Soldier*, please send your letters to:

**Theatre IV, 114 West Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23220**

If you need to reach Theatre IV by phone, please call **1-800-235-8687**.

# LAND OF THE BUFFALO SOLDIERS

The Buffalo Soldiers played an important role in the settlement of the American West. Identify the states which the Buffalo Soldiers helped to settle. The dates shown indicate when each state achieved statehood. (Consult an atlas to see if your answers are correct.)

