Black Indians *clean up*

By P. A. Tatum

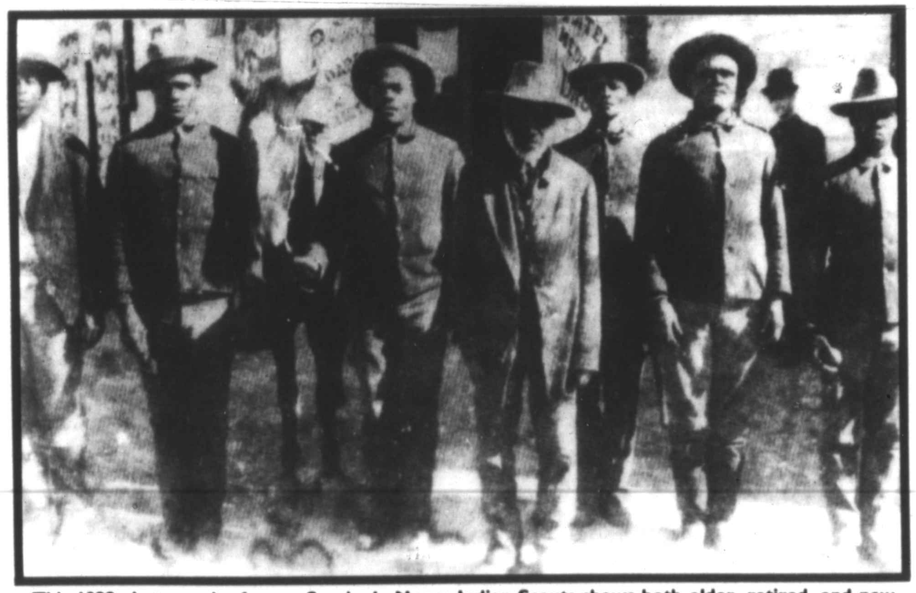
Few recall them today, but they do exist in the annals of history—a small group of black Seminole Indian scouts who played a major role in ridding Texas of its troublesome Indian and outlaw problems during the post Civil War years of the 1870s.

The history of the black Seminole Indians began in Florida during the late 1600s or early 1700s. They were the product of intermarriage between Indian nations already present and runaway African slaves from Georgia and Alabama. During their stay in Florida, the black Seminoles were described as fierce warriors, industrious builders and resourceful farmers.

Their Texas saga, just a part of their long, rich and eventful history in the United States, began about the 4th of July, 1870 when large numbers of the nation returned at the behest of the U.S. Army. They settled around Fort Duncan, Texas in the Eagle Pass region.

Previously, this particular group of black Seminoles had lived a generation of freedom in Mexico and had been in service in the Mexican army.

According to an article by Eva Sanderlin published in the December 1988 issue of "Wild West" Magazine, Texas at this point in history was a vast stomping ground for hostile Indians of the Southwest. Warriors from the Kiowa, Commanche, Cheyenne and Arapaho nations had broken free of their reservations in the Indian Territory and attacked settlers from the High Plains to the Rio Grande.



This 1889 photograph of some Seminole Negro Indian Scouts shows both older, retired, and new recruits.

Something had to be done but "the calvary found its best efforts against the marauders futile. Settlers were afraid to venture into the unprotected territory, and the westward movement slowed to a halt in frontier Texas," wrote Sanderlin.

Historian and Author William Loren Katz wrote in his 1986 book, "Black Indians," published by Atheneum Press, the blue-coated army also had another concern—a civilian problem in the form of "hostile, unreformed Southern rebels who hated the sight of Yankees and their uniforms."

These former Confederate soldiers were unemployed and "they easily became desparados spoiling for a fight." One gang, the "King" Fisher gang, dominated the Eagle Pass area and cattle rustling was a favorite activity of these bitter, lawless men.

Faced with these problems and past efforts to solve the situation having proved unsuccessful, U.S. Army Officers began listening to rumors about a group of part black, part Seminole Indians located in the Mexican mountains.

"They were called 'Protectors of Coahuila' and according to gossip, these half-blooded warriors were fierce fighters, expert trackers, and good living off the land," wrote Sanderlin.

Captain Frank Perry was dispatched to Mexico "to negotiate an agreement" with the black Indian nation. In return for its young men serving as army scouts, their families would be provided with food, necessities and eventually some good farming land, Katz wrote.

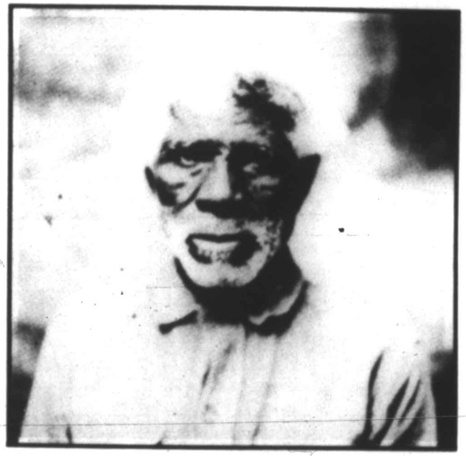
A formal treaty was forged and signed with the United States. Scores of black Indians arrived in Texas in 1870 lead by their leader, Chief John Horse. Unfortunately for the black Seminoles, the treaty was lost and the U.S. never made good its promises, according to both Katz and Sanderlin.

"In dress, manners, and skills, Seminole men were like Plains Indians. As desert fighters and trackers, they were probably the finest soldiers the U.S. Army sent into the field," Katz wrote.

The picture they presented, however, when first appearing before their young white officers who were largely West Point trained, was not encouraging. The black Indian scouts were a lot of "scruffy men sporting Indian war bonnets, sometimes with buffalo horns." Early army reports praised their fighting abilities but bemoaned their appearance, said Katz.

It took two years for the army to find a leader the Seminole Indian scouts could respect. He was a young Lieutenant from New York, John L. Bullis. According to Katz, Bullis, a Quaker, was a man of striking contradictions and an unconventional soldier. He proved as tough as his men, who called him "Thunderbolt."

P. A. Tatum is a New York-based Freelance Writer



Pompey Factor, one of four scouts to earn the Congressional Medal of Honor, died penniless in his mid-eighties, denied a U.S. Army pension.

Katz: "On the trail, Bullis and his scouts quickly became a fighting fist, bold and loyal, risking death for each other. Scout Joseph Philips recalled the relationship in those words:

"The scouts thought a lot of Bullis. Lt. Bullis was the only officer that ever did stay the longest with us. That fella suffer just like we all did in de woods . . . He didn't stand and say, "Go yonder; he would say, 'Come on boys, let's go get 'em.' "

Under Bullis's careful guidance, according to Katz, the black Indian scouts drove their "incomparable skills into the battle against crime in Texas. They could pick up a trail three weeks old, track foes who believed they had eluded all pursuers, and then surprise a target when least expected."

Only about 40 scouts served the U.S. Army at any one time, wrote Sanderlin. A total of 147 served from 1870 until 1914 when the unit was disbanded.

During their brief tenure, these black Indian scouts compiled a record never again to be equaled in U.S. Calvary history. They produced four Medal of Honor winners and never had a scout killed or seriously wounded in battle, Sanderlin wrote, who also concluded:

The black Seminole Indian scouts took part in "about 30 campaigns against hostile forces, sometimes staying in the field for months. In the space of about 10 years, they helped wipe out the Indian threat to Texas and the Western movement."

Photos from William Loren Katz's private collection.