



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: One Soldier's Service: Caleb Benson in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, 1875-1908

Full Citation: Thomas R Buecker, "One Soldier's Service: Caleb Benson in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry, 1875-1908," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 54-62.

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1993Caleb_Benson.pdf

Date: 1/26/2011

Article Summary: Caleb Benson, an African American soldier chose to make a permanent career in the Army after the Civil War, serving in the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Units. This is his story.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Caleb Benson, Jacob Benson, Nathan C Meeker, Thomas Thornburgh, Captain Dodge, Wesley Merritt, Geronimo, S L Woodward, Robert Smither, J K Mizner, Leonard Wood, Robert D Read, Percilla Smith, Henry Whitehead, Jimmie Benson, Levi Robinson, Edwin N Hardy, W C Beckett, C H Bash, James A Cook, James Beecher, Reverend Myers, Whirlwind, George Stouch, Crazy Horse

Place Names: Fort Clark, Texas; Fort Stanton, New Mexico; Fort McKinley, Philippines; Presidio, California; Whipple Barracks, Arizona; Fort Apache, Arizona; San Carlos, Arizona; Fort Thomas, Arizona; Fort Union, New Mexico; Ojo Caliente, New Mexico; Fort Brown, Texas; Fort Custer, Wyoming; Fort Robinson, Nebraska; Milk Creek, Colorado; Fort Lewis, Colorado; Columbia, South Carolina; Chickamauga Park, Georgia; Huntsville, Alabama; Lakeland, Florida; Porto Padre, Cuba; Holguin, Cuba; Fort Assinniboine, Montana; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Rio la Plata; Middle Park; Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming Territory; Fort Custer, Montana; Fort Buford, North Dakota; Montauk Point, Long Island; Monzanillo, Cuba; Crawford, Nebraska; Glen, Nebraska; Fort McPherson National Cemetery

Keywords: Ninth Cavalry, Tenth Cavalry, Buffalo Soldiers, Company D, Ute, White River Agency, Milk Creek siege, Chiricahua, water hole campaign, Troop B, Troop K, Pullman strike, Montana Coxeyites, Tongue River Reservation, Cree, Cuba invasion, Fifth Corps, Springfield rifle, machine gun platoons, *Thomas* [transport vessel], Special Order Number 215, Army of Cuban Occupation Medal, Spanish War Service Medal, United Spanish War Veterans, Indian Wars Medal, Army Philippine Campaign Medal, Thirty-second Convention badge, Army and Navy Union membership badge, United Indian War Veterans membership badge, First Annual Convention, United Indian War Veterans Badge [1929]

Photographs / Images: Map by Del Darling, Caleb Benson's military career; Caleb Benson in later years; Caleb Benson's Medal Chest; Troop K Tenth Cavalry

ONE SOLDIER'S SERVICE: CALEB BENSON IN THE NINTH AND TENTH CAVALRY, 1875-1908

By Thomas R. Buecker

In 1866 African Americans were allowed for the first time to serve in the regular United States military establishment. Six new regiments, including the Ninth and Tenth U.S. Cavalry, were organized. The new units were to be composed solely of black enlisted men, and so, in the post-Civil War years, recently freed slaves and other young blacks enlisted in the two cavalry regiments, which soon took on their famous nickname, the "Buffalo Soldiers."¹

After being organized, both cavalry regiments were sent to western duty, as the Plains Indian wars riveted the nation's attention for the next quarter century. Although the duty was hard, many soldiers chose to make a permanent career in the army. Many began their service in southwestern deserts, then later saw duty on the northern Plains. The close of the century saw the western frontier army transformed to one of empire, with overseas duties in the Caribbean and the Philippines. In later years some soldiers returned to the Plains states to homestead or to retire. One such professional soldier was Caleb Benson, who followed this full route between the Civil War and World War I.

Information on Caleb Benson's early life is sketchy. According to his obitu-

ary, he was born on June 25, 1861, but other dates in June 1860 or 1861 appear in his record.² His birthplace is listed as Aiken, South Carolina, on his first army enlistment application, but he recorded Jacksonville, Florida, on subsequent forms. His father's name was Jacob; his mother's name is unknown. There were also several sisters in the family.

When Benson was six years old, the family moved to Charleston, South Carolina. After both parents died, the teenaged Benson followed the example of many young men at the time and decided to enlist in the United States Army. On February 2, 1875, at Columbia, South Carolina, he filled out enlistment papers before 1st Lt. William H. Beck, Tenth Cavalry.³

At this time twenty-one was the legal age for enlistment. In the case of minors, a parent or someone responsible filled out the "consent in case of minor" portion of the application. With both parents deceased, this part of Benson's paper was not used. When he signed up, declaring that "I am 21 years and 7 months of age, and know of no impediment to my serving honestly and faithfully as a soldier," he was actually only fourteen or fifteen years old. At the time recruit quotas had to be filled, and recruiting officers were not overly inquisitive. Caleb signed the papers before a witness with an "X," unable to write his name until years later. He enlisted for five years, the standard cavalry term throughout

most of the post-Civil War years.

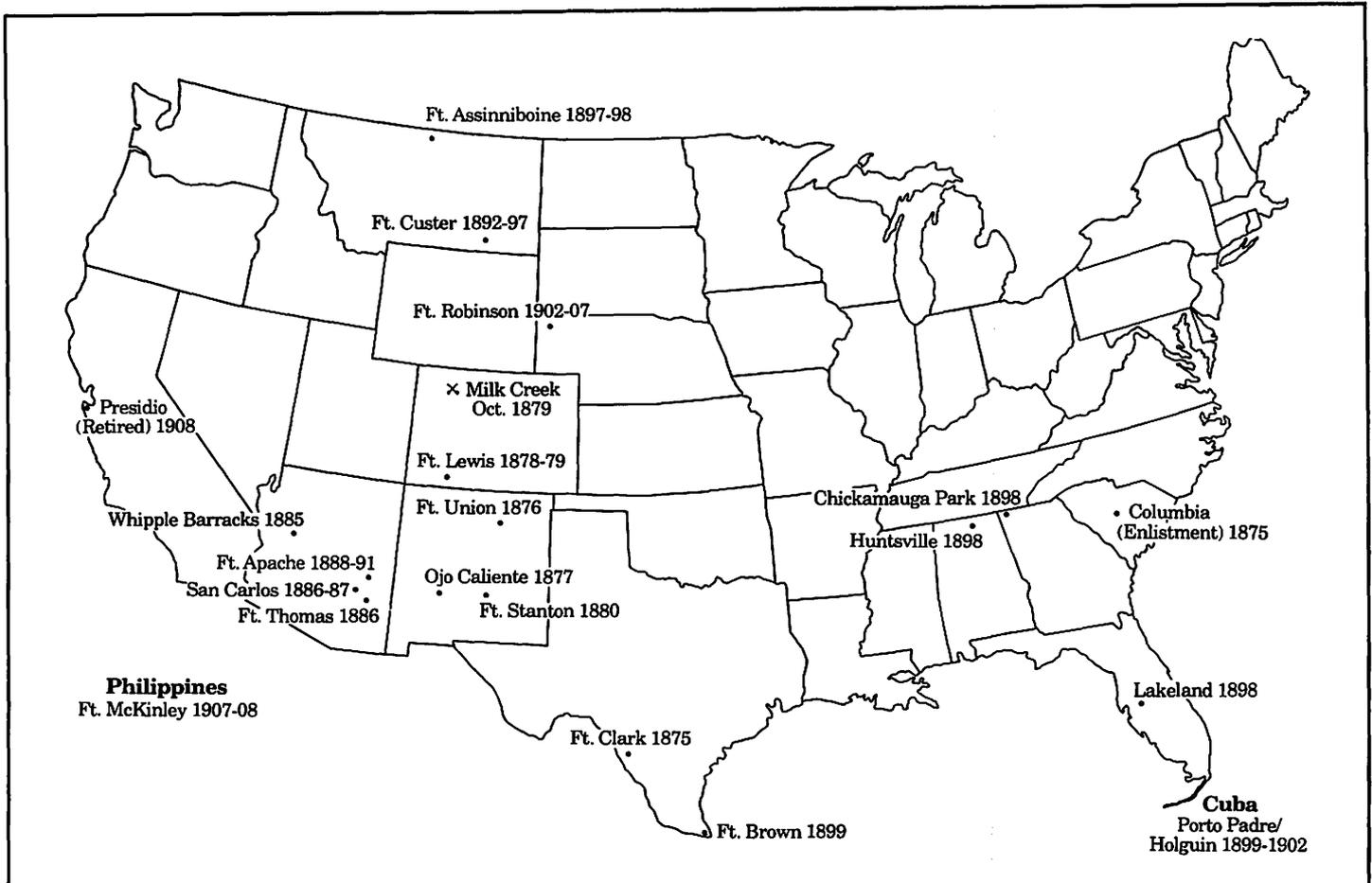
Enlistment records provide a description of the new recruit. He was five feet, four inches tall, of slight build, weighing about 135 pounds. He listed his previous occupation as a waiter. Caleb Benson's long career in the military had begun.⁴

Benson was assigned to the Ninth Cavalry, which was then stationed at posts in Texas. On May 6 he joined Company D, commanded by Francis S. Dodge, at Fort Clark as part of a draft of nineteen recruits.⁵ The regiment received eighty-six new recruits that month. In Texas the Ninth Cavalry protected stage and mail lines from marauding Indians and helped establish law and order. Shortly after his arrival Benson got a taste of army life on the frontier. On June 8 his company went into the field on a scouting patrol, which lasted until June 26. While on scout the company covered 357 miles.⁶

During the winter of 1875-76 the Ninth Cavalry was ordered to the District of New Mexico. On February 26, 1876, the men of Company D left Fort Clark en route to Santa Fe. They arrived on April 30 and were immediately assigned to Fort Union, arriving at that post May 5.⁷ In July Benson's company was sent north into Colorado; however, Caleb was at that time held in confinement and remained behind. He remained at Fort Union on detached duty for a year while Company D was in Colorado and later at Fort Wallace, Kansas. In July he re-

Thomas R. Buecker is curator of the Nebraska State Historical Society's Fort Robinson Museum.

Caleb Benson



Caleb Benson's military career. Map by Dell Darling.

joined his company, which was detached to Ojo Caliente, scouting and guarding the Apache reservation there.⁸

In March 1878 Benson's company was ordered back to Colorado, scouting through the Rio La Plata region. In September they escorted the boundary survey between Colorado and Utah. Company D then spent the winter of 1878-79 building quarters at the new post of Fort Lewis at Pagosa Springs.⁹

Restlessness among western Utes caused Company D to be sent into the Middle Park area of Colorado to prevent "any possible collision between

the Indians and settlers in that region."¹⁰ Company D spent the summer and late fall of 1879 on field service there. In early October Private Benson was involved in one of the major battles of the West.

During the preceding months the Utes had grown increasingly angry over agent Nathan C. Meeker's attempts to force their instant acculturation. Soon it was reported that the Utes were unsettled and were starting forest fires in central Colorado. In September Meeker, fearing for the lives of agency employees, called for military protection. Troops under Maj. Thomas Thornburgh were dispatched from Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming Territory, and headed south to the White River Agency. The call for soldiers infuriated

the Utes, and on September 29 Thornburgh's column of 175 soldiers was attacked at Milk Creek, fifteen miles north of the agency. Major Thornburgh was shot and instantly killed, and the supply wagons were quickly corralled. The command was surrounded and suffered heavy casualties. However, during the night couriers slipped away for help.¹¹

On October 1 the couriers reached Captain Dodge's company. Dodge issued 250 rounds of ammunition and three days rations to his thirty-five men and made a forced march on Milk Creek. About 4:30 A.M. on October 2, Company D reached the besieged command, where their "arrival caused great rejoicing by the entrenched men and the newcomers were greeted with glad

hand."¹² Almost immediately all of Company D's horses were shot by the Utes. Most of Thornburgh's animals met the same fate.

The combined force then settled in to defend itself. Finally, on October 5, a larger relief force under the command of Col. Wesley Merritt arrived, drove off the Utes, and ended the Milk Creek siege. Recalling the fight years later, Benson related a somewhat bizarre (possibly apocryphal) observation on the relationship between the black cavalrymen and the Plains Indians:

While we were engaged during August and September of 1879 in the White River campaign (sic), two white men lost their lives in going down to the river for water to make coffee, something that the colored cooks had done without loss of life.

When the first white man left with his kettle, a soldier in our colored regiment said to him, 'Before you go down there, you'd better black your hands and face.'

Scoffing at the idea, the white man left. But he did not return. Another white cook also went down to the river, and he didn't come back either.

People may think it isn't true, but the Indians never shot a colored man unless it was necessary. They always wanted to win the friendship of the Negro race, and obtain their aid in campaigns against the white man.¹³

The Milk Creek fight was costly. Major Thornburgh, nine enlisted men, and three civilian employees died, and three officers, forty enlisted men, and two teamsters were wounded. However, after Milk Creek the problems with the Utes were eventually solved through negotiations, although for several years a large number of troops were massed near the reservation.¹⁴

With the loss of its horses, Company D left for Rawlins, Wyoming Territory. There it boarded a train and returned to Fort Union by rail on October 23. Remounted, Benson's company spent the rest of the year scouting in the vicinity of Fort Bayard. On January 11, 1880, Benson was sent with his company on a scout. In February his five-year enlistment ended, but he was held in service, being away from any post. On March 23 he was discharged at Fort Stanton for "expiration of enlistment," seven weeks after the actual

date for his discharge.¹⁵

After five years as a civilian, during which he may have worked as a cook or baker, Benson rejoined the army. In the spring of 1885 the Tenth Cavalry was transferred to Arizona to prepare for campaigns against Geronimo and other Chiricahuas. Black troops guarded reservations and strategic points along the Mexican border, in what the soldiers called the "water hole campaign."¹⁶ Regimental headquarters for the Tenth Cavalry was at Whipple Barracks, near Prescott, Arizona Territory, where Benson reenlisted. On June 9, 1885, he was enlisted in the Tenth Cavalry by 1st Lt. S. L. Woodward.¹⁷ He also received an examination by an army surgeon (not the case during his 1875 enlistment), who found him "free from all bodily defects and mental infirmities."¹⁸ On this enlistment record he stated he was twenty-four years old, far beyond the legal minimum and closer to the truth.

Benson was assigned to Troop B as a company baker.¹⁹ His troop, under command of Capt. Robert Smither, was also stationed at Whipple Barracks.²⁰ On October 20 Benson received a marksman's certificate; although his scores were low, they allowed qualification. His skills with the carbine led him to be described as a "very poor shot" in a period of growing interest in marksmanship in the army.²¹

While at Whipple Barracks, his troop performed the usual garrison duties and also went out to repair government telegraph lines. In May Troop B transferred to The Post of San Carlos,²² where the men performed field and escort duty. In June details from Troop B rode 1,290 miles in pursuit of raiding Apaches. The black troops spent long weeks in the field. In November 1886 regimental returns reported, "The troops of different detachments [Troop B] marched during the month 2,490 miles." The regimental history later noted, "For most of the troops there was little glory in this campaign. Their's was the harder duty, to prevent out-

break, rather than chase the renegades back onto their reservations. Their's was the dismal duty to guard mountain passes, water holes and trails that did not lead to glorious fighting."²³ In December Troop B, with two other Tenth Cavalry troops, was assigned to Fort Thomas, Arizona Territory.²⁴

At Fort Thomas, just before Christmas 1886, Caleb had an unfortunate accident. He was assigned to help dig a well as part of a guard fatigue duty. While he was digging, the walls caved in on him. His fellow workers quickly pulled him out of the hole and took him to the post hospital, where it was found he had a double hernia. Shortly afterwards he was ordered with his troop for a long pursuit of Apache raiders. Four months later the troop camped at Fort Apache,²⁵ where Benson checked into the post hospital. Because of his injury and the long period on horseback, he was compelled to wear a truss for the rest of his military career.²⁶

From 1887 to 1890 Benson's troop shuttled between San Carlos, Fort Thomas, and Fort Apache. While at Fort Apache, he reenlisted in the Tenth Cavalry in June 1890. On this and later enlistments, his physical disability (hernia) was waived by inspecting surgeons and his troop commander. One troop commander later stated "notwithstanding this disability he continued to perform the duties of an able bodied soldier."²⁷ On this, his third army enlistment, he was transferred to Troop K, where he remained for the remainder of his time in the service.

In 1891 Col. J. K. Mizner requested that his Tenth Cavalry regiment be transferred out of the Southwest to new stations. He preferred to go north, as far as Kansas.²⁸ The War Department sent the Tenth north, but much further than Kansas, to the Department of Dakota. The Tenth found itself garrisoning frigid Forts Custer and Assiniboine in Montana, and Fort Buford²⁹ in western North Dakota.

Troop K arrived in Montana by rail in early May and marched thirty miles through a late spring blizzard to its

Caleb Benson

new station at Fort Custer.³⁰ Along with regimental headquarters and Troops A, B, E, F, and G, Troop K helped form Custer's regular garrison. Life in Montana was a great relaxation for the Tenth Cavalry after hard and hot duty in the Southwest. Private Benson spent most of the summer of 1892 on detached service as a cook at the post's sawmill camp. While at Fort Custer the soldiers trained, made practice marches, and performed regular garrison duties, punctuated by several civil disorders.

On April 25, 1894, Troops B, E, G, and K hurriedly left Fort Custer on a thirty-five-mile march to Custer Station on the Northern Pacific Railroad. Arriving at 2:00 A.M. the next morning, the squadron captured a contingent of Coxey's Army, a haphazard organization of labor protesters. A number of Montana Coxeyites had commandeered a Northern Pacific train at Butte City to take them to join other protesters at Washington, D.C. After the train was captured, the highjackers were jailed, and the troops returned to post.³¹

On July 7 Troop K left its post to guard railroad property from Pullman strikers at Billings, arriving the next day. Other troops of the regiment were assigned to critical railroad points in Montana. By the end of August the strike had cooled, and Troop K returned to Fort Custer on July 29.³²

In June 1895 Benson took a brief furlough, evidently making a trip to Fort Buford. At Buford he signed up for his fourth army enlistment, his third in the Tenth Cavalry. The 1880s were marked by the removal of hundreds of roaming Cree Indians, who had come into Montana from Canada. Their presence generated fears among the Montanans, who called on the military to remove them. In 1896 a detachment from Troop K escorted a number of Crees from Billings to the Canadian border. For several years periodic "roundups" of Crees were part of the service of the army in Montana.³³

In April 1897 the last major Chey-



Caleb Benson in later years. (NSHS-R659-2655)

enne-white confrontation occurred when a Northern Cheyenne named Whirlwind killed a sheepherder near the Tongue River Reservation. Three troops, including K, were sent to the reservation to arrest Whirlwind. Through the diplomacy of Agent George Stouch, the arrest was made and the troops returned to their stations.³⁴

Fort Custer was abandoned as a military post in November of 1897. Troop K moved overland to Billings and then northwest to Fort Assiniboine, near Havre.³⁵ By January 1898 the regiment was united there.

In 1898 war with Spain changed things for the frontier army. The increasing threat of hostilities led the secretary of war to order the concentration of troops for an invasion of Cuba. On April 15 six cavalry regiments, including the Tenth, and most of the army's field artillery were massed at Chickamauga Park in northern

Georgia. This site, established during the Cleveland administration as a maneuvering ground for regular army and National Guard units, became the preferred location for the concentration of regular army forces. Coinciding with the arrival of the regulars, volunteer regiments also gathered there.³⁶

On April 29 Brig. Gen. William Shafter was ordered to move the force to Tampa, Florida, in preparation for the invasion of Cuba. Between May 9 and 14, all regular army units at Chickamauga Park left for Tampa. Because of severe overcrowding there, several regiments, including the Tenth Cavalry, were sent to Lakeland to the east, where the regiment readied for combat, drilling in the early morning or after sunset because of the intense heat. Two squadrons of the Tenth Cavalry became part of the Fifth Corps for the first invasion wave. Benson's squadron was attached to the Fourth Corps and was to remain in Lakeland, part of the second wave, which was never needed. While at Lakeland, Benson enlisted for the fifth time (on June 23). By this time army enlistments had been shortened from five years to three.

By late summer the short-lived war with Spain was over. Because the invasion was unwisely made in the summer, most of the troops sent to Cuba fell dangerously ill with fever and malaria. The army decided to move the stricken soldiers back to the United States and quickly built a convalescent camp at Montauk Point on the western tip of Long Island. In August the squadron at Lakeland brought the horses and baggage of the regiment to rejoin their returning comrades. With thousands of men being shipped to Montauk, reunited units were sent as rapidly as possible to other stations. In the fall of 1898 the Tenth Cavalry went to Huntsville, Alabama, to a large camp established for Spanish War mobilization.

During this service in the south, the Tenth Cavalry witnessed a change of white racial attitudes. As the regiment

headed south before the war, one veteran recalled, "We received great ovations all along the line. Thousands of people were thronged at the places we would stop and we were treated royally."³⁷ While traveling from Montauk to Huntsville, the regiment even paraded in Washington before President McKinley. But while in Huntsville two cavalymen were killed by a black civilian, motivated by the rumor of a reward for every dead black soldier.³⁸ In January 1899 the regiment was moved to posts in Texas, with Troop K assigned to Fort Brown.³⁹ On the way to Texas the troop train was fired on while it passed through Mississippi.⁴⁰

The stay of Troop K at Fort Brown was relatively short, as American forces were ordered back to Cuba to help keep order. In May the regiment sailed for Cuba to replace a volunteer regiment. The troopers considered occupation duty as the best service they had ever experienced. Troops were stationed throughout the interior of Cuba, where the soldiers occasionally pursued guerrillas and bandits. Under the governorship of Gen. Leonard Wood authority was established and eventually the regiment was consolidated at two points, Manzanillo and Holguin.⁴¹ While Troop K was stationed at the latter place, Private Benson reenlisted for his sixth term on June 23, 1901.

In May 1902 the American forces withdrew, leaving the new Cuban government in control. The Tenth Cavalry was assigned to posts in Wyoming and Nebraska. The troops at Holguin left on May 4. Benson's troop was sent to Fort Robinson in the northwestern corner of Nebraska. On May 16, 1902, the regimental headquarters, band, and the First and Third Squadrons arrived at Robinson, much to the joy of the merchants of nearby Crawford, who always appreciated large garrisons at the post. Originally established in 1874, Fort Robinson was already one of the older western posts still utilized as troop stations.

At Fort Robinson the officers and enlisted men were housed in adobe

quarters, much the same as those in the Southwest. Garrison duties, training, and practice marches occupied most of the soldiers' time.

Early in the twentieth century the army made several major changes in the soldiers' uniforms and equipment. They traded their old blue uniforms for more functional khaki, and got new and more stylish dress uniforms as well. Other changes came in armament with the adoption of the 1903 Springfield rifle and the organization of machine gun platoons with every cavalry regiment.⁴²

During this period there was little field service except in 1906, when part of the regiment was sent after some Utes, who had left their reservation in Utah and were heading toward South Dakota.⁴³ With little field duty, the black cavalymen were able to take up athletics for the first time. Troop K won regimental championships in football and baseball. In target practice Troop K stood third for all company organizations and first in the cavalry branch.⁴⁴ Benson's aim evidently improved, as he qualified for the sharpshooter's badge about this time.

By 1903 Caleb Benson had over twenty years of service in the U.S. Army. He could qualify for a pension with one more regular enlistment, because his time overseas in Cuba counted double toward retirement. However, his military career was nearly cut short while he was at Fort Robinson.

In August 1903 a detachment went to the wood reserve five miles west of the post to cut lumber. Benson was sent along as cook. While he bent over his field stove, the wind suddenly came up, causing the fire to flare, blowing ashes and flames into his face. Benson was rushed to the post hospital for treatment and it was discovered that he lost most of his eyesight. He also suffered a head injury from a fall at the time of the accident, which later caused memory loss. Although hampered by injuries, Caleb continued his service.⁴⁵

In June 1904 he had reached an-

other discharge date. Not ready to leave the army, he applied for reenlistment, but his application was refused by the post surgeon on account of disabilities received in the line of duty. The surgeon reasoned that besides suffering from the hernia, Benson had been thoroughly disabled by the recent stove injuries. Reenlistment was denied and Private Benson was out of the army.

Benson remained around Fort Robinson, a common practice whereby older, discharged soldiers were often supported by comrades. He also worked for an officer, assisting in the kitchen to earn his board. In 1904 he applied for a government pension since he was "unable to earn a living and depend largely on the good will of my former troop for support."⁴⁶ In order to receive the pension, Benson completed affidavits about his recent injuries and those incurred at Fort Thomas in 1886. Fellow soldiers and officers who knew that the accidents were caused in the line of duty sent similar statements. In a letter to the commissioner of pensions, Benson wrote, "After having put in the best years of my life (27) . . . I therefore beg of you to hasten assistance which of right I should have from my government."⁴⁷

As an alternative to receiving a disability pension, Benson wanted to be allowed to reenlist in order to finish thirty years of service. Several officers of the Tenth Cavalry, besides the captain of his former troop, expressed their consent to having him enlist in their units. If not allowed to reenlist, he well deserved a pension they felt, "on account of his long, faithful and valuable service as a soldier."⁴⁸ Maj. Robert D. Read,⁴⁹ who had been Benson's captain when he was in Troop B, urged that he be permitted to reenlist to complete his thirty years and receive full retirement pay. Evidently the arguments of Benson and his former officers paid off – and it is possible his damaged eyesight improved – because on January 29, 1907, he reenlisted in his old troop.

Back in the army Private Benson prepared again for overseas service.

Caleb Benson

On March 1, 1907, headquarters, band, and Troops A, C, D, K, and L boarded twelve passenger coaches and left Fort Robinson for San Francisco. There they boarded the transport *Thomas*, bound for the Philippine Islands. Although the war in the Philippines officially ended in 1902, the American military presence continued for many years, as army units rotated between the Philippines and the United States. The Tenth reached Manila on April 2, and Benson's Troop K with the Second Squadron took up station at Fort McKinley.

By the summer of 1908 Benson had served six regular enlistments totaling twenty-four years. With overseas duty figured double for retirement,⁵⁰ he neared the thirty-year mark. At summer's end, he was ordered to The Presidio of San Francisco.⁵¹ Just before his retirement, Benson was promoted to first sergeant, though all through his military career his rank had been private. (On one occasion he was rated as a trumpeter.) The higher rank gave him more retirement pay and honored his long service in the army. While he was at The Presidio, the War Department issued Special Order Number 215 on September 15, 1908, placing 1st Sgt. Caleb Benson on the retired list created by act of Congress on March 2, 1907. After thirty years of service in the Southwest, northern Plains, and overseas duty in Cuba and the Philippines, Caleb Benson returned to civilian life.⁵²

According to his retirement orders, "He will repair to his home." Benson decided to return to Crawford. The Quartermaster Department furnished him first class limited rail transportation to Crawford, and \$4.50 for subsistence for three days of travel. On September 30 he left San Francisco for Nebraska.⁵³

On March 26, 1909, Benson married Miss Percilla Smith of Crawford. Percilla was a native of Virginia and a graduate of the Hampton Institute, who had moved to Crawford from Philadelphia. At the time of the marriage

she was thirty-four and he was forty-eight.⁵⁴ Shortly after their marriage, the Bensons filed a homestead claim about one and one-half miles northwest of Glen, just up the White River from Fort Robinson.

After living on the homestead for four years Caleb and Percilla moved to Fort Robinson. There they were both employed in the household of Capt. Henry Whitehead, Twelfth Cavalry, for several years. Whitehead had been a young lieutenant in the Tenth Cavalry in the old Montana days. Just after World War I the Bensons again worked on the post, this time for Lt. Col. Edward Calvert. In 1923 they accompanied the Calverts to Wisconsin, working for them there for a short period. About 1925 the Bensons moved to New York City, where they resided in Harlem on West 137th Street. The reason for the move is unknown. While in New York the Bensons accepted custody of a young boy, Jimmie Amos, as a foster son. Although they had no children, Caleb and Percilla gave him permission to assume their last name, and he became "Jimmie Benson."⁵⁵ During his years in New York, Caleb joined several veterans' groups, including the United Indian War Veterans, United Spanish War Veterans, and Veterans of Two or More Wars.

The Bensons moved back to Crawford in July 1934. They still owned the property near Glen. Jimmie Benson followed them to Crawford during World War II.⁵⁶

In the summer of 1934 two stone pyramids were erected at Fort Robinson. One was in honor of the post's namesake, Lt. Levi Robinson, and its twin honored Crazy Horse, who was killed there in September 1877. Maj. Edwin N. Hardy, the post commander, planned an elaborate ceremony on September 5. A number of special guests were invited to sit on the speaker's stand, which was the back porch of the headquarters building. Several retired soldiers in the Crawford community, including Sergeant Benson, were invited to participate.

Along with Sgt. W. C. Beckett, Tenth Cavalry, Benson sat beside descendants of Sioux leaders, Maj. Gen. C. H. Bash, the quartermaster general, and other luminaries such as Capt. James A. Cook and the Reverend George A. Beecher.⁵⁷ The ceremony was a poignant moment, as Fort Robinson's past and present were briefly drawn together.

On November 19, 1937, after a brief illness, Caleb Benson died of coronary thrombosis. He was seventy-six years old. His funeral was held the following Monday in the old African Methodist-Episcopal Church of Crawford with the Reverend Myers of the Nazarene Church conducting the service. He was survived by his wife, one sister, "and a host of friends." He was given a military burial at the Fort Robinson cemetery. A squad from the American Legion post of Crawford fired the salute.⁵⁸

In January 1938 Percilla applied for a widow's pension. At the time Caleb died, his government pension was \$94.50 per month. Mrs. Benson moved to Virginia to be near her sister, and later both returned to Crawford, where they lived for many years. She died at the Grand Island veterans' hospital on August 25, 1966, and was buried with Caleb in Fort McPherson National Cemetery.⁵⁹

NOTES

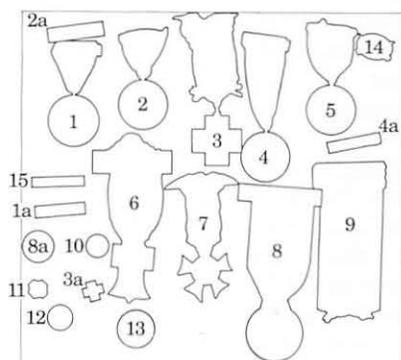
¹The best single source on the organization and early history of the Ninth and Tenth Regiments remains William H. Leckie, *The Buffalo Soldiers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967).

²For example, the date June 24, 1860, appears on Benson's headstone at Fort McPherson National Cemetery.

³William H. Beck served during the Civil War and was appointed second lieutenant, Tenth Cavalry, in 1867. He remained with the regiment until 1899 when he became the colonel of the Forty-ninth U.S. Volunteer Infantry. Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 204.

⁴Information on Benson's enlistment is from his enlistment records, National Archives & Records Administration (hereafter NARA). Copies on file at the Fort Robinson Museum (hereafter FRM).

(to page 62)



CALEB BENSON'S MEDAL CHEST

Caleb Benson was proud of his campaign medals and veterans' badges. The term medal "chest" is commonly used by collectors to denote all of the decorations and medals earned by an individual during his or her career and which would have been displayed on the breast or "chest" of that individual's uniform. Many years ago Benson's medals were mounted on green velvet and placed in a gold-painted decorative frame. In the summer of 1992 the Nebraska State Historical Society acquired them from Rebecca Benson, Jimmie Benson's wife. Besides the framed medals, a number of other items related to Caleb's military service were acquired, including his 1890 discharge certificate signed at Fort Apache, retirement orders, membership cards for veterans' organizations, and Troop K, Tenth Cavalry, insignia. Also included are the marksman's buttons and certificate (signed by Gen. George Crook) Benson won at Whipple Barracks and a later sharpshooter's pin. Caleb Benson's medals and related items have great historical significance as tangible reminders of one soldier's service.



The author wishes to thank Col. Albert F. Gleim of Fort Myer, Virginia, who located and provided information on the Benson medals from the National Archives. In addition, Diana Walter, veterans service officer with the Department of Veterans Affairs, secured copies of Benson's pension file for the Nebraska State Historical Society.

1. Army of Cuban Occupation Medal, No. 4155. Established in 1915 for service in Cuba from July 18, 1898, to May 20, 1902. It commemorates the military occupation of Cuba, which commenced with the Spanish surrender at Santiago and ended when U.S. troops were withdrawn, leaving the new Cuban government in control. Reverse of planchet (medal) is displayed, which is the same as on all early army campaign medals. The obverse shows the Cuban Republic coat of arms. Benson

applied for this medal on March 27, 1928, while living in New York.

1a. Ribbon bar for Cuban Occupation Medal.

2. Spanish War Service Medal, 16833. Authorized July 9, 1918, for persons who served between April 20, 1898, and April 11, 1899, but did not serve overseas during that period. Benson also applied for this medal on March 27, 1928.

2a. Ribbon bar for Spanish War Service Medal.

3. United Spanish War Veterans Badge. The organization was established in 1899 for regular and volunteer veterans of the Spanish-American War. Its purpose was to pursue pension claims and set up posts for camaraderie of fellow veterans.

3a. United Spanish War Veterans lapel button.

4. Indian Wars Medal, No. 1485.

Caleb Benson

Authorized by Congress in 1905 and established by War Department general order in 1907. It commemorates the various campaigns against Indian tribes after 1865. The drape is obviously a homemade replacement for the original style ribbon. This medal was issued to Benson in October 1910 and sent to the quartermaster at Fort Robinson for presentation.

4a. First style ribbon bar for Indian Wars Medal. Black stripes were added one-fourth inch from each side in 1917 to distinguish it from the ribbon bar of the French Legion of Honor.

5. Army Philippine Campaign Medal, No. 12051. It was authorized in 1905 for service in the Philippines during the insurrection from February 4, 1899, to July 4, 1902. It was also extended for several periods between 1906 and 1913. Benson's tour of duty did not fall in an authorized period for this medal. He acquired the medal secondhand, probably believing he deserved it on account of his Philippine service. This particular medal was originally issued to Pvt. James B.

Wiggins, Troop C, Fourteenth Cavalry, in 1909. Again the reverse of the planchet is displayed. The obverse shows a palm tree with a lamp and scales of justice on its sides, and lettered "PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION 1899."

6. Convention badge, Thirty-second Convention, United Spanish War Veterans, Philadelphia, August 17-20, 1930.

7. Army and Navy Union membership badge. Founded in the late 1880s, the Army and Navy Union was an organization for soldiers and sailors to pursue the interests of military personnel on active duty and veterans of the regular establishment. "Camps" were established on military posts, including Fort Robinson.

8. United Indian War Veterans membership badge from General George Crook Camp No. 1, Los Angeles, California. This organization of Indian War veterans advocated legislation and provided camaraderie for those who served in the Indian campaigns. Founded in 1928 this group

broke away from the parent National Indian War Veterans organization.

8a. United Indian War Veterans lapel button.

9. Convention badge, First Annual Convention, United Indian War Veterans, Los Angeles, September 15-17, 1929.

10. Lapel button for Veterans of Two or More Wars organization.

11. Lapel button for Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) membership.

12. Lapel button for The Western Casualty Company, Denver. Not military.

13. Collar insignia for Troop E, Tenth Cavalry. As Benson was never in this troop, he probably obtained it as a souvenir of his old regiment.

14. Unofficial military pin.

15. First style ribbon bar for the Army Spanish Campaign Medal. Obviously a souvenir; Benson was not authorized this Spanish-American War campaign medal. Because his squadron did not go overseas during the period of hostilities, Benson received the Spanish War Service Medal.



Troop K, Tenth Cavalry, probably just after Benson rejoined the regiment in 1907. Benson is in the second row, fourth from left, behind the soldier wearing several medals. (NSHS R659-2653)

⁶Francis S. Dodge served as an officer with a black volunteer cavalry regiment in the Civil War. He was appointed first lieutenant, Ninth Cavalry, in 1866. He was appointed paymaster in Jan. 1880. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 376. Fort Clark, in south central Texas, was an important link in the border defenses against hostile bands crossing from Mexico. It was not abandoned until 1946. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 146.

⁷Unless otherwise noted, all information on Ninth and Tenth Cavalry troop movements is from "Returns From Regular Army Cavalry Regiments, 1833-1916," Microfilm Publications No. 744, NARA.

⁸Fort Union was established in 1857 for the protection of the Santa Fe Trail. It also served as an important supply center for posts in the region. Abandoned in 1891, it is now a national monument. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 105-06.

⁹The Post at Ojo Caliente was established near the agency for the Warm Springs Apaches in 1874. Troops were stationed there from the late 1870s to 1882. *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰Fort Lewis was established to guard the Ute Reservation. In 1880 it was moved to a new site twelve miles west of Durango, Colorado. *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹John M. Carroll, ed., *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (New York: Liveright, 1971), 240.

¹²Philip Sheridan, *Records of Engagements with Hostile Indians in the Military Division of the Missouri* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882; Old Army Press Facsimile Edition, 1969), 88-91.

¹³Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, 241.

¹⁴*Northwest Nebraska News* (Crawford), Aug. 9, 1934.

¹⁵Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indians, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), 338-40.

¹⁶Fort Stanton was established to control the Mescalero Apaches and served as an important base of operations in southwestern New Mexico. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 103.

¹⁷Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, 179.

¹⁸Samuel L. Woodward served as an officer in the Civil War. He was appointed second lieutenant in the Tenth Cavalry in 1867 and served as regimental adjutant from 1867 to 1876 and 1883 to 1887. He was promoted to major, First Cavalry, in 1900. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 1059.

¹⁹Benson enlistment papers, on file at FRM.

²⁰In 1883 the designation "Company" was officially changed to "Troop." In 1889 "Battalion" was changed to "Squadron."

²¹Robert G. Smither served as an officer in the Civil War and was appointed first lieutenant in the Tenth Cavalry in 1867. He was promoted to captain in 1881 and retired in 1888. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 905. Whipple Barracks was located immediately north of Prescott to protect miners in the region in 1863. It was garrisoned until 1922 when it became a veterans' hospital. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 14-15.

²²Comment written on Benson's 1890 dis-

charge certificate, Caleb Benson Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society (hereafter NSHS). For more on army marksmanship, see Douglas C. McChristian, *An Army of Marksmen* (Fort Collins: Old Army Press, 1981).

²³The Post of San Carlos was established in 1882 for control of the Indians at the San Carlos Reservation. It was abandoned in 1894. Francis Prucha, *Guide to the Military Posts of the United States* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1964), 105.

²⁴E. L. N. Glass, *The History of the Tenth Cavalry* (Fort Collins: Old Army Press, 1972), 26.

²⁵Fort Thomas was established in 1876 in connection with the removal of the Chiricahua Apaches to the San Carlos Reservation. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 12.

²⁶Fort Apache was established as Camp Apache to control the Coyotero Apaches. It was designated as a fort in 1879 and abandoned as a military post in 1924. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 3.

²⁷Details of the accident are from an affidavit filed by Benson on Jan. 14, 1905, found in his pension file. Copies of this file were provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and are on file at FRM.

²⁸Endorsement of Major Read on letter of Feb. 18, 1905, from the Bureau of Pensions. Benson pension file, FRM.

²⁹Glass, *History of the Tenth Cavalry*, 28. John K. Mizner commanded the Tenth Cavalry from 1890 to 1897. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 718.

³⁰Fort Buford was established in 1866 just below the confluence of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers for protection along the river. It was abandoned in 1895. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 110-11.

³¹Fort Custer was established in 1877 at the confluence of the Big Horn and the Little Big Horn rivers to control the Sioux and other Indians in the area. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 79.

³²For more on Coxeyite activities, see Thomas A. Clinch, "Coxey's Army in Montana," *Montana* 15(Autumn 1965): 2-11.

³³For more on the Pullman Strike, see W. Thomas White, "Boycott: The Pullman Strike in Montana," *Montana* 29 (October 1979): 2-13.

³⁴For more on the Cree removals, see Nicholas P. Hardeman, "Brick Stronghold of the Border: Fort Assiniboine 1879-1911," *Montana* 29(April 1979): 54-67.

³⁵Lonnie E. Underhill and Daniel F. Littlefield, "Cheyenne 'Outbreak' of 1897," *Montana* 24(Autumn 1974): 30-41.

³⁶Fort Assiniboine was established in 1879 to prevent the return of Sitting Bull and his warriors from Canada and to control the Blackfeet in the region. It was abandoned in 1911. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 79.

³⁷All information contained herein on the mobilization for the Spanish-American War is from Graham A. Cosmas, *An Army for Empire* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1971).

³⁸Carroll, *The Black Military Experience*, 344.

³⁹Marvin E. Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army, 1891-1917* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1974), 11.

⁴⁰Fort Brown was originally established in 1846, just prior to the Mexican War. Occupied by the Confederates in the Civil War, it was finally abandoned as a military post in 1944. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 144-45.

⁴¹Fletcher, *The Black Soldier*, 113.

⁴²Glass, *History of the Tenth Cavalry*, 39.

⁴³For more on the service of the Tenth Cavalry at Fort Robinson, see Thomas R. Buecker, "The Tenth Cavalry at Fort Robinson," *Military Images* 7(May-June 1991): 6-10. A more detailed discussion is in Frank N. Schubert, *Bufalo Soldiers, Braves, and the Brass: The Story of Fort Robinson* (Columbia, Md: White Mane Publishing Co., 1993).

⁴⁴For more on the "Ute Uprising," see David Laudenschlager, "The Utes in South Dakota, 1906-1908," *South Dakota History* 9 (Summer 1979): 233-47.

⁴⁵Glass, *History of the Tenth Cavalry*, 43-45.

⁴⁶Affidavits of Caleb Benson dated Jan. 14, 1905, and George W. Gaines dated Aug. 25, 1905. Benson pension file, FRM.

⁴⁷Letter, Caleb Benson to commissioner of pensions dated Aug. 22, 1905. Benson pension file, FRM.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*

⁴⁹Read endorsement on letter from Bureau of Pensions dated Feb. 18, 1905. Benson pension file, FRM.

⁵⁰Robert D. Read graduated from West Point in 1877 and was assigned to the Tenth Cavalry. He became captain in 1893 and major in the Tenth in 1903. Heitman, *Historical Register*, 819.

⁵¹Read endorsement, Feb. 18, 1905. Benson pension file, FRM.

⁵²The Presidio of San Francisco was originally established by the Spanish in 1776. It was occupied by the Americans in 1847. An important west coast installation, it is presently slated for abandonment. Frazer, *Forts of the West*, 30-31.

⁵³An original copy of Special Order 215 is found with the Caleb Benson Collection, NSHS.

⁵⁴Copy of transportation order, Caleb Benson Collection, NSHS.

⁵⁵Information from copy of marriage certificate in Benson pension file, FRM; *Northwest Nebraska News* (Crawford), Aug. 9, 1934.

⁵⁶Personal interview with Rebecca Benson, Crawford, July 28, 1992.

⁵⁷Jimmie Benson worked as a plumber at Fort Robinson during the war, after which he operated a plumbing business in Crawford until he retired. In June 1945 he married Rebecca Pierce of Tampa, Florida. In 1988 Jimmie Benson died and in the fall of 1992 Rebecca moved back to Florida.

⁵⁸"Souvenir Program - Dedication of Twin Monuments in Honor of Lieut. Levi H. Robinson and Crazy Horse," copy on file at FRM.

⁵⁹*Crawford Tribune*, Nov. 26, 1937.

⁶⁰In the summer of 1947 the Fort Robinson cemetery was moved to Fort McPherson National Cemetery. The Bensons are interred in grave F253. Caleb's headstone is a Spanish-American War veteran's marker. Percilla's name and dates of birth and death are carved on the back.