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THE NATIONAL PARKS
America's Best Idea

**UNTOLD STORIES FROM
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

NATIONAL PARK RANGER SHELTON JOHNSON

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NATIONAL PARK RANGER SHELTON JOHNSON

Early History

On July 25, 1958, Shelton Johnson was born at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. His father, James O. Johnson, Jr., joined the army. Before Shelton was six, he'd lived in California, Germany, England, South Carolina, and Kansas City, finally returning to Detroit for elementary school. His mother, Shirley Ann Yancy, took work as a seamstress, but for most of Shelton's childhood, was a homemaker (Shumaker).

Growing up in a working class, inner-city neighborhood of northwest Detroit, Shelton was about as far from wilderness as one could get:

When I was a child in Detroit, national parks really didn't exist, except on television, on PBS. There were no family trips to national parks. . . . They really didn't exist for me and for my friends. We didn't sit around [saying], "Boy, can't wait to get to the Grand Canyon!" You know? That didn't come up as a topic of conversation in Detroit . . . But always somewhere inside me there was this desire to see Yellowstone. There was a desire to see the Grand Canyon. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker; Burns)

At night, Shelton would dream about mountains. This nighttime landscape may have had its source in his early childhood: he'd attended kindergarten in Germany, while his father served in the military, but he had no conscious memories of having been there (Shumaker).

In early 1983, after briefly serving in the Peace Corps in Liberia, Shelton entered a Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, focusing on creative writing. There, he received numerous awards, including a Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship, a Michael Gutterman Award, a Scholarship to the Cranbrook Writer's Conference, and a Major Hopwood Award ("About" 1).

Yellowstone

As the end of his first year in the MFA program approached, Shelton began looking for a quiet place to write over the summer. One of his roommates had an application to work as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone National Park. On a lark, Shelton filled out an application, too, thinking the park would be an ideal place to work on his manuscript. Much to his surprise, he got the job. "My intention was to write a book," Shelton says. "Then, *Yellowstone happened*" (Shumaker).

I remember the first time I arrived in Yellowstone. I got off a bus and we were in Gardiner, Montana, right outside the north entrance where there's that wonderful stone arch that says, "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People." And it doesn't say "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of Some of the People" or "a Few of the People." It says "All of the People." And for me, that meant democracy; that meant I was welcome. I stepped outside and as I was stepping down onto the ground, there was a bison—a 2,000-pound animal—walking by. There was no one else around and the bison was just

strolling by! I looked up at the driver and I said, “Does this happen all the time?,” and he looked at me and said, “All the time.” And I said to myself, “I’ve arrived.” I can’t imagine being in any other place. . . . Once I stepped off that bus, I never got back on. And I’ve been [in] national parks ever since.
—Shelton Johnson (Burns 3)

Yellowstone was Shelton’s first experience of a national park, an experience that changed his life forever. “It basically reconfigured my universe, my personal universe,” he says, “and how I fit into that.” (Burns 3).

From a seasonal job washing dishes at the Old Faithful Inn to running a dorm for other seasonal workers, that summer was a defining time for Shelton. He left the park for a year but missed the experience tremendously. Returning in the summer of 1985, Shelton applied to enter the Park Service and become a ranger. From that moment on, he was hooked. “Once I had the uniform on,” Shelton says, “Wow—that was it!” (Shumaker).

Shelton’s first job was at the Yellowstone West Entrance ranger station, in 1987. After that, his work assignments included stints in Mammoth Hot Springs, Great Basin, and in the National Capital Parks East of Washington, DC (“About” 1).

African Americans in the Parks

During that first summer in Yellowstone, when he was still washing dishes, Shelton and a friend found themselves at Old Faithful. “I don’t understand,” she said, noticing something missing from the boardwalks crisscrossing the geysers and hot springs. “Where are all the black people?” (Shumaker).

That question stuck with Shelton. While working as an interpreter at Fort Dupont Park (NPS National Capital Parks East), in 1992–1993, he had the opportunity to speak with public school kids from inner-city Washington, DC. Shelton would present information about the parks to young black students, who’d been bussed in from the surrounding area. “These were kids living in Anacostia, southeast DC,” Shelton says, “in the middle of the crack wars.” 1993 was the peak of violence in the area, with 133 homicides recorded (“Anacostia”).

I remember talking to them about my experiences in Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Park and it was like I was talking about Mars or Jupiter. It was as far-flung from their experience as if I was Neil Armstrong talking about what it felt like to be on the moon.

They had never seen mountains; they had never seen anything having to do with nature. That’s when I first made the resolution that I had to figure out how to connect these kids with nature, to get them to have a nature experience. —Shelton Johnson (Associated Press 3; Shumaker)

From there, Shelton was transferred to Great Basin National Park and, finally, to the place he has worked for more than a decade: Yosemite.

Buffalo Soldiers

In his work as an interpreter, Shelton presented a number of programs to Yosemite visitors. But he was always searching for a way to reach kids who felt they had no link to the parks—kids of

black ancestry, kids in inner cities. Although he'd heard about buffalo soldiers patrolling the park from his predecessor, Ranger Althea Roberson, it was almost by accident that he found a picture of them. Shelton describes the experience as being like “stumbling into your own family while traveling in a foreign country” (Associated Press 3–4).

I took a closer look at the picture and read the caption. It was a photograph of the 24th Infantry taken somewhere in Yosemite in 1899. The 24th, along with the 25th Infantry and the 9th and 10th Cavalry, were African-American army regiments that during the Indian War period became known as Buffalo Soldiers. —Shelton Johnson (*Shadows in the Range of Light*)

Shelton had discovered the faded 1899 photo deep in the archives of Yosemite National Park. In it, five U.S. Army infantry soldiers were mounted side by side, on horseback, rifles slung over their shoulders. They'd been captured for posterity on patrol in a pine forest deep in the Yosemite backcountry. Most exciting, for Shelton, was that—like him—they were African American (Nolte 1).

In the years before the creation of the Park Service, the army patrolled the parks, building and maintaining trails and wagon roads, and keeping out poachers and grazing animals. During three of those years—1899, 1903, and 1904—African American cavalry and infantry, stationed at the Presidio in San Francisco, spent their summers on “park duty,” patrolling Yosemite and Sequoia national parks.

The buffalo soldier in Yosemite and Sequoia in general is not very well known, but that doesn't mean it's not very important. Soldiers in general protected both Yosemite and Sequoia because when you create something like a national park, you're really creating a value system. And once you have that value system, if it's not universal, other people aren't gonna share that, that value. So the early parks—Yellowstone, Sequoia and Yosemite—had to have park protectors because otherwise people would be going into those areas doing what they've always done: cutting trees down for firewood or shooting the deer to feed their family.

How do you tell someone who's just trying to keep their children fed that it's illegal now to shoot the game in Yosemite or in Sequoia National Park? How do you tell a husband or a wife that their children are gonna be cold 'cause you can't cut those trees down for firewood anymore? And that'd be a difficult proposition if you were a white soldier. But when you add that overlay of race, and you have an African American, a colored man, giving orders to people who are not used to taking orders from anyone who looks like me, then you have the beginning of a very interesting day. —Shelton Johnson (Burns 4-5)

Although Park historians have long known about the presence of these buffalo soldiers in the parks, their contributions had not been recognized or taught to the public (Associated Press 3).

No one talked about it—not in the literature, not in the programs in the park. And I thought to myself, “This is something that I can do.” —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Shelton got to work, in archives and libraries, and in the park itself. He enrolled in Yosemite's Mounted Horse Patrol School, graduating in 1996, so he could understand more fully the experience of being part of a mounted patrol. He conducted further research—looking at period uniforms, to discover what the buffalo soldiers wore while on patrol, and perusing Army Muster Rolls from the late 19th and early 20th century. In the process, Shelton proved that African Americans had served in the park in much greater numbers than previously believed (“About” 1–2).

While looking through the muster rolls, Shelton found a Ninth Cavalry private named George Metcalf from Frankfort, KY. A co-worker from the same town recognized the name and established that, indeed, Private Metcalf was their ancestor. Without Shelton's efforts, the family would never have known of their connection to the early stewardship of the park.

The successful discovery of Metcalf and other descendants prompted more research: Shelton received an award from the Yosemite Fund to finance the Sierra Nevada Buffalo Soldier Genealogy Research Project, with the goal of finding descendants of the men who served in Yosemite and Sequoia in the Ninth Cavalry and Twenty-fourth Infantry. In 2005, three descendants of Thomas Smith, a buffalo soldier who served in Yosemite in 1899, were found in Atchinson, KS, and interviewed in early June 2005. The Tyler family has never visited Yosemite, or any other national park (“About” 3).

My long-term goal is to have a family reunion right here. The descendants of all the soldiers—and there are thousands of them—have no idea that their great-grandfather or grandfather was essentially a park ranger, before “park ranger” was even a word. —Shelton Johnson (Associated Press 2)

Elizy Bowman

Since 1998, Shelton has told the story of the buffalo soldiers in the national parks—in print, on camera, and in person. During evening programs and daytime ranger walks in Yosemite, he tells the story of the buffalo soldiers in Yosemite through the dramatic portrayal of a character he's developed: Sergeant Elizy Boman (pr. *uh-LEEZ-y BOW-mun*).

The real Elizy Boman was a private in Company A in Sequoia and later was a deserter. I started thinking, “Elizy was a deserter, and this history has been deserted; this history has been abandoned.” I reassigned Elizy to Troop K in Yosemite, so I could tell his story here in the park. I also figured that, after all these years, he deserved a promotion, so I made him a sergeant. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Shelton grafted his own family history onto Elizy so that, when he told the story, it would be more authentic, both for himself and his audience.

It's very emotional being Elizy and much more challenging than anything else I've done—becoming a person from a different time period and, on top of that, the son of slaves. For an African American to take that on—talk about being a slave and a sharecropper in South Carolina—is not easy. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

In the park, Shelton’s audience is primarily white Euro-American tourists. At first, he told Elizy’s story without humor, sharing the soldier’s viewpoints on slavery and racism.

For the first time, white people were hearing about it in a way that isn’t funny. They’d never heard that before. So, people would start closing up. Then I started softening it a bit, bringing humor in. That’s when the media started becoming interested. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

One park visitor who saw and was affected by the presentation was Rita Bingham, a public television executive in Cleveland, Ohio. She brought Shelton to Cleveland, where he spoke with more than 30,000 kids, doing 27 programs in one week. African American students were engaged and excited by Elizy, who—Shelton hopes—is a conduit for getting them out into nature.

If we forget a Yosemite or a Yellowstone or a Grand Canyon . . . what we’ve actually forgotten is who we are. We’ve forgotten the very forces that have shaped us as a people and as a culture.

It’s difficult to describe the value of parks, and what they mean, because it’s like asking someone, “What does your mother mean to you or what does your father mean to you? What does the community in which you live and where you’ve spent your life...what does that mean to you?” It’s a place . . . where people return to find some aspect of their own story that’s written there and to see themselves written in that story

Everyone needs beauty. African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans—whatever group that you happen to be referring to—they all need beauty. —Shelton Johnson (Burns 2, 1, 11)

Awards and Honors

In 2002, Shelton received the Pacific West Region Freeman Tilden Award, the highest award given by the National Park Service for Interpretation. He has presented his program, “Yosemite through the Eyes of a Buffalo Soldier” in public schools across the United States, at the Department of the Interior’s Yates Auditorium in Washington, DC, and at the International Storytelling Center in Tennessee. He has also created an award-winning Website, *Shadows in the Range of Light*. On the site, he writes a letter to the soldiers:

Death does not occur with the stopping of the heart, but when we choose to forget. One hundred years after horses and the creaking of wagon wheels, your names are air, unseen, yet moving around us. How can something as substantial as a column of twenty-six men riding side by side on a dusty road leave neither imprint on the ground nor sound in sky? —Shelton Johnson (*Shadows in the Range of Light*)

Stories about Shelton’s work have been featured in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Los Angeles Times*, for the *Associated Press*, and broadcast on NPR, BBC Radio, and Voice of America. His buffalo soldier living history presentation, in which he portrays Elizy Boman, has been selected by *Sunset Magazine* as one of the best interpretive programs in the western United States (“About” 2).

Recently, in the summer of 2006, Shelton received a commission from the governor of Kentucky as a “Kentucky Colonel” in recognition of his genealogical work on descendants of the

buffalo soldiers. Shelton was nominated for the award, the highest honor granted by the state of Kentucky, by State Representative Derrick W. Graham. Other Kentucky Colonels include Former President Lyndon Johnson, Fred Astaire, Whoopi Goldberg, Pope John Paul II, Tiger Woods, Senator John Glenn, and Mae West (Johnson; "Yosemite ranger" 1).

Despite such company, Shelton has remained true to the reason he started this work:

I can't forget that little black kid in Detroit, who knew nothing about the national parks. No one ever told me anything! And I can't not think of the other kids, just like me—in Detroit, Oakland, Watts, Anacostia—today. How do I get them here? How do I let them know about the buffalo soldier history, to let them know that we, too, have a place here? How do I make that bridge, and make that bridge shorter and stronger?

Every time I go to work, and put the uniform on, I think about them. —Shelton Johnson (Shumaker)

Today, Shelton is the only African American ranger in Yosemite, but tomorrow he hopes to be joined by many others. And for him, it all goes back to a few precious moments in nature.

One of the last jobs I'd had in Yellowstone was delivering the mail on snowmobile; that's the only way you can get around in the wintertime. . . . There I was, by myself, with just snow, and just mountains. And as I dropped down into Hadyn Valley, there were bison crossing over the road; 2,000-pound mammals crossing over the road. And it was so cold [that] the bison, as they breathed, their exhalation seemed to crystallize in the air around them. There were these sheets, these ropy strands, of crystals kind of flowing down from their breath. As I was watching them, they turned their heads and looked at me.

I remember stopping the snowmobile and turning it off, and listening. And I felt like this was the first day; this morning was the first time the sun had ever come up. I was all alone but I felt I was in the presence of everything around me. It was one of those moments when you get pulled outside of yourself into the environment around you. I forgot completely about the mail. All I was thinking of was that a single moment in a place as wild as Yellowstone—or most of the national parks—can last forever. A single moment.

I felt like I could almost hear the clouds as they were moving over me and could almost hear the light as it was hitting the ground. And I just completely lost the concept of time, of who I was, identity. I just sort of went out there into the landscape.

Maybe I'm still there. —Shelton Johnson (Burns 13)

These experiences, Shelton maintains, are universal, and speak to all of us, regardless of skin color.

National parks provide a doorway into a transcendent experience—a sense of something that's greater than yourself; a place that's greater than yourself; a way of being that's greater than yourself. And all you have to do is often pay an entrance fee. You pay that fee and you pass over that threshold into that national park and it's a place that's bigger than the name. It's a history that's more important

than the framework within which we have established a relationship with the land or with our own history. So whenever someone enters a national park, it's like going to another world. It is going to a wonderland. And I think that all people feel that transition. They feel that sense that they've gone to some place better than what they've left behind. But the irony is that where they've gone is the place where they've always been. It's just now they understand it. Now they see it. Now they feel it. Because parks are like going home. —Shelton Johnson (Burns 1)

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