



Combining education and entertainment

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Clyde Robinson, 94, of Seattle, is one of the last remaining WW II-era Buffalo Soldiers. Robison served with the 9th Cavalry beginning in 1942.

Clyde Robinson was born Nov. 20, 1920, in Gillett, Ark., just south of Little Rock.

One of 10 children, Robinson grew up on a rice farm. As far as his eyes could see, he could only see rice fields.

“I don’t like rice,” the 94-year-old Robinson said from the living room of his Seattle home. “I’ll eat it, but it’s not my favorite. We mostly ate potatoes.”

To get away from rice, Robinson became a lumberjack. But in 1942 he received a draft letter making him a Soldier in the Army’s Ninth Cavalry.

Robinson soon became one of the illustrious Buffalo Soldiers, a name given to the African-American regiments by the Native Americans during the Civil War. After the Civil War, Congress authorized the creation of the Ninth and 10th Cavalry and 38th - 41st Infantry Regiments in 1866. They fought during World War I and World War II before being disbanded.

“A lot of people don’t know about us,” Robinson said. “I didn’t know anything about what the Buffalo Soldiers did in the Civil War. They don’t teach you that in schools.”

Robinson enjoys educating people about the Buffalo Soldiers. He even has a blue and yellow Civil War era uniform that he wears — a saber completes the look. His passion for those who served in the cavalry is matched by Jackie Jones-Hook. Jones-Hook operates the Ninth and 10th (Horse) Cavalry Buffalo Soldiers Museum at 1940 S. Wilkeson St. in Tacoma. It's only one of two Buffalo Soldiers museums located off military installations. It was founded by her father, William Jones, a former Buffalo Soldier who served with the 10th Cavalry from 1940-44.

“Tacoma is really a military town,” Jones-Hook said. “A lot of people who live here have served in the military. He got this idea that there's such a great history of what these men really did for America, so he wanted to do this museum outside of a military installation.”

On Joint Base Lewis-McChord, there are two museums — the Lewis Army Museum and the McChord Air Museum. Both offer free admission, but donations are appreciated.

In 2005, Jones decided he wanted to preserve the history of the Buffalo Soldiers with a museum. He spent much of his life collecting artifacts and literature about the Buffalo Soldiers. He bought the house on Wilkeson Street with the intention of turning it into a museum. William Jones died in 2009 and now his daughter runs the museum along with a board of directors. The museum is open from 11 a.m. to 3p.m., Wednesdays and Saturdays, or by appointment.

“Our mission overall is to educate, preserve and present the history and the contributions of the black men in the building of America,” Jones-Hook said. “But also to highlight and say thank you to all those who have served.”

Despite being a few years old, the museum is relatively unknown. To help promote it, Jones-Hook is busy preparing for a special tribute event featuring actor Danny Glover. The event is scheduled for Jan. 25 at 7:30 p.m. at the Pantages Theater, 901 Broadway, Ste. 700 in Tacoma. A special meet-and-greet with the actor will take place at 6 p.m.

Robinson is planning to attend the event and speak to the audience about his time with the Buffalo Soldiers. While he was drafted, Robinson said the cavalry was mostly volunteers. Robinson describes his time in the Army as “hard.”

“They told you there's only one way — the Army way,” he said. “It was hard, very hard. Them big city boys couldn't handle it.”

During his time in the Army, Robinson traveled to North Africa, Italy and the South Pacific. He served in a machine-gun troop.

“I was good with machine guns, but I wasn't too good with a rifle,” he said.

Having grown up on a farm, Robinson was comfortable with horses and found that aspect of the military to be easy.

On Dec. 26, 1945, Robinson was out of the Army and living on a ship in Tacoma.

“We stayed on the ship for seven days looking for a place to put us up,” Robinson said.

He recalls the difficulty Soldiers faced once the cavalry was disbanded. Some Soldiers had been in the cavalry for 20 years and suddenly were being sent to separate units.

“After you’ve been in something, 15-20 years, and then it just disappears — that affected a lot of people,” Robinson said. “The white organizations, they busted up a lot of those cavalry outfits, too, but they sent them to mechanized (infantry), tanks and all that ... but most of the black cavalry, like the ninth and 10th, they sent them to labor.”

Robinson was sent to a port battalion and then, after a year of doing that, he left the Army. He said transitioning out of the Army was a challenge.

“When you go overseas, you were treated the same, but when you came back to the states it was just different in how we were treated,” he said.

Robinson recalls going with another Soldier to the YMCA in Tacoma to get cleaned up.

“Me and my partner, they wouldn’t even let us take a shower — that was very hard,” he said. “One lady issues us the towels and everything and another came out and said, ‘they can’t take no shower here.’ They said we had to go to a place down the street.”

Despite those frustrations, Robinson spent 10 years at sea as a room steward working on a military transport. During that time, his ship hauled Soldiers and dependents back and forth from Japan, Korea and China. Robinson said his favorite place was Panama.

“I’ve been to Rome too, but I just liked Panama,” he said.

Eventually Robinson found his home in Seattle working for Boeing as a forklift operator. He’s since retired from that job, but he still works as a gardener.

“I can’t sit still,” Robinson said. “I always have to be doing something.”

In the basement of his home, the walls are covered in pictures and memorabilia chronicling the history of the Buffalo Soldiers. He even has a picture of himself and Jones.

Similar stories and artifacts can be found on the walls inside the Tacoma Buffalo Soldiers Museum. There, visitors can learn how the Soldiers built forts, installed telegraph lines, and fought in the front lines during WWII. There are also books and media educating the public about the different things the Buffalo Soldiers were charged with.

“It’s a story about love and survival during tough times,” Jones-Hook said. “And certainly its about heroes. These men are often called the forgotten heroes, but they did a lot for America.”