

Bloomington man led all-black regiment in Spanish- American War



Men of Company G, 8th Illinois Volunteers, under the command of Capt. Julius Witherspoon of Bloomington, at rest before the camera.

During the Spanish-American War, men from Bloomington, including Capt. Julius C. Witherspoon, were part of a pioneering “all-colored” state regiment led not by white officers, which was the disgraceful practice back then, but rather by black officers.

The professionalism of the 8th Illinois United States Volunteers in the aftermath of the war clearly demonstrated that blacks were just as capable of leading men under difficult conditions as their white counterparts.

Born in Archidelfia, Arkansas in 1859 or 1860, Julius Witherspoon and his wife Mary moved to Bloomington in 1884. Once here Julius found employment as a laborer, hostler, city police patrolman and livery barn manager. The large Witherspoon family included six daughters, four born in Arkansas and two in Bloomington.

In 1898, the U.S. waged a four-month war against an overmatched Spain. In the end the Philippines and Puerto Rico became territorial possessions of the emerging American empire while Cuba became nominally independent, though it traded one overseer (King Alfonso XIII of Spain) for another (Uncle Sam).

Some members of the black community looked upon the Spanish-American War through jaundiced eyes. They noted that black U.S. troops fought to free Cubans (many of whom

were descendents of African slaves) from under the thumb of Spanish colonial rule, all the while enduring second-class (or worse) citizenship back in the states.

Despite that fact, black regiments were some of the first ordered to Cuba, including the Tenth Cavalry (the famed Buffalo Soldiers), which played a key role in the Battle of San Juan Hill. Often, these units were referred to as “immune” troops in the exaggerated belief that blacks could better withstand the climate and diseases of the Caribbean tropics.

Witherspoon served as captain of the 8th’s Co. G. The regiment’s muster roll listed 1,195 men and 76 officers, of which at least 36 were from McLean County. Joining Witherspoon in Co. G., for example, was Lt. Henry W. Jameson, a minister from Bloomington.

The “Splendid Little War” (as U.S. ambassador to London John Hay called it) ended before the 8th Illinois made it to Cuba. Even so, the Illinois unit was used for post-war policing, which ironically proved just as dangerous, as there were far more U.S. casualties from tropic- and camp-borne diseases than combat.

In July 1898, the regiment mustered into service at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield. It was there that Illinois Gov. John Riley Tanner told the men that “even from the very doors of the White House have I received letters asking and advising me not to officer this regiment with colored men, but I promised to do so, and I have done it. I shall never rest until I see this regiment,—my regiment,—on the soil of Cuba, battling for the right, and for its kinsmen.”

The 8th served in Cuba seven long months, from mid-Aug. 1898 (Spain signed the armistice on Aug. 12), spending most of its time in and around San Luis, a town on the eastern end of the island.

In early January 1899, The Pantagraph published a lengthy letter from Witherspoon. “When we first arrived, we suffered heavily from malarial fever, but since the dry season has set in we have had very few cases of anything,” he wrote in the letter dated Dec. 20, 1898. During the first week in Cuba the regiment suffered from a lack of provisions. “But from that time until the present,” Witherspoon added, “we have had fresh beef, canned fruit hot biscuits and light bread every day.”

Near the end of its tour, the 8th Illinois received an inspection by Gen. J.C. Breckinridge, who declared that it was “a shame to muster out of service such an excellent regiment.” This praise did much to buoy the weary spirits of the men. “This day marked the death of the old stalking horse that Negroes were unable to command their own race,” noted the authors of the official regimental history.

Once home, Witherspoon returned to the livery business, though all was not well. Mary died in 1903, and Julius suffered from ill health, possibly from malaria or some ailment contracted in Cuba.

Witherspoon never recovered, passing away Nov. 12, 1906, at the old soldiers' home in Danville. He was only 46 years old. His earthly remains were brought to Bloomington for a funeral at Wayman African Methodist Episcopal Church. Members of Co. G took charge of the service and escorted the body to Evergreen Memorial Cemetery on the city's south side.