

# **Marching to remember the forgotten: Buffalo soldiers hoof it across the state**

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**ALTON** - They were named "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Native Americans after the color of their skin and texture of their hair, and they have been mostly forgotten by mainstream American war history.

Buffalo Soldiers served in the American military from 1866-1951, when the armed forces were finally integrated. Despite that much-needed integration, many men and women of African American descent in the military still consider themselves "Buffalo Soldiers" to honor their ancestors who went before them.

To celebrate those brave men and women who fought for a nation, which at that time treated them as second class citizens at best, Joshua Young and Carlton Cannon went to Marshall, Illinois, on the border of Illinois and Indiana and walked Highway 40 all the way to Vandalia - a distance of nearly 90 miles.

Young, who recently ran for Mayor of Alton as a write-in candidate, served in the U.S. Marine Corps. He said he considered himself a Buffalo Soldier in honor of those who went before him. This was the second year he took the march, and he was joined by Cannon, who recently ran for Fourth Ward Alderman. Young said Cannon, who is not a veteran himself, marched for his father who served in the Vietnam War.

The purpose of the march on Memorial Day Weekend was to bring awareness to the Buffalo Soldiers and what they sacrificed for their nation as well as their important positions in American history. Young said the ninth and 10th cavalries, who were exclusively Buffalo Soldiers, escorted people across the prairies of Illinois and into the Great Plains. He said General Custer had a chance to utilize Buffalo Soldiers for his last stand at Little Bighorn, but took a regular unit instead.

"He had a choice to take a Buffalo Soldier detail with him, but he chose instead to take a regular detail," Young said. "The Buffalo Soldiers would have been extremely more experienced than the regular detail he chose to bring."

In short, Custer may have been killed by his own racism in more ways than just the attempted genocide of Native Americans.

During their walk, Young said he fell in love with Southern Illinois and experienced a brand new perspective of people.

"I saw a part of Illinois with absolutely no bias," Young said. "They made me feel like family across the walk. They made me feel like my character is what they saw - just my character. It was obvious I was an African American walking for African Americans."

He said he and Cannon did not experience any other African Americans along their journey, but said they were treated like family all the same by white people who brought them into their homes for food, beverages and hospitality.



"They made us feel like family - the whole way," he said. "Every person made us feel like family. They made us feel valued and made our cause feel equivalent to other American values. Lots of connections and friendships were made."



When Young and Cannon, who runs a community garden in the Fourth Ward of Alton, got to their starting point, they realized they had forgotten sunflower seeds they intended on scattering along the journey. That problem was rectified by a sweet woman who purchased as many as 12 pounds of sunflower seeds for the pair.

"We broadcast sunflowers on the side of the road along the way," Young said. "If we were to drive back toward the end of the summer, we may see patches of sunflowers from Marshall to Vandalia. They are symbols of friendship and harmony throughout Southern Illinois."

Those sunflowers will hopefully add to the landscape with which Young fell in love during his walk.

"I fell in love with Southern Illinois's landscape," he said. "I could imagine back in those times, without highways or infrastructure, traveling in carriages and by horse would have been incredible."

He said he also experienced a lot of the needs and concerns of the residents of what he described as "small, tight-knit, loving communities." He said he spoke with people about the concerns of large corporate farms chewing away at small family holdings.

"On Memorial Day, that day seems to bring altruism and compassion among the people of Southern Illinois," Young said.

Both Young and Cannon intend on using some of their newfound connections as well as the passion and history of Altonians to establish a Buffalo Soldiers chapter in the area and even have the ambitious plan of founding a museum dedicated to the impact of Buffalo Soldiers on this area and their ripples through the entire region into the Great Plains.

Alton has a lot of history relating to the Buffalo Soldiers, Young said. Besides being the beginning of the frontier they protected in the 19th Century, many young African American soldiers from Alton - especially the incorrectly named "Mexico" area went to fight for the French in World War I while sporting the patch of the Buffalo Soldiers.

Young said the French treated the Buffalo Soldiers better than the Americans who sent them to the French to ensure segregation. In fact, history is full of stories about brave black soldiers becoming war heroes in Europe only to come home to economic disparity at home - and were eventually forgotten by the very people who waved the flag under which they fought and died.

He marched in honor of one of his mentors and a Korean War veteran named Ted Burnett. Burnett owned a construction company in Alton, and did a lot of infrastructure work across the community - including the construction of a park in the shade of the Clark Bridge. Burnett died earlier this year, so Young dedicated his Memorial Day remembrance walk in his honor.

"He was a dear friend to myself and a mentor," Young said. "He touched a lot of hearts out there."

More information on the Buffalo Soldiers and the walk can be found on the Facebook event page operated by Young. It can be found [here](#).

