

# Seminole Negro Scouts

Gazing from the train window you may be able to imagine traveling through this wide and beautiful part of the country in the 1870's - the long expanses of blue skies and rolling prairies where Apache and Comanche Indians controlled the land. As the United States sought to gain control of this area, a remarkably tough and resourceful group of expert trackers helped the US army against their fellow native-Americans. Known as the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts, this once elite fighting group was eventually abandoned by the army.

After America's Civil War, military troops returned to this region, reoccupying former military posts and building new ones. These posts dotted the landscape between San Antonio and El Paso in order to advance frontier settlement in lands that were home to the Apache and Comanche. These remote frontier posts were occupied by large numbers of military troops with the mission of patrolling the area and making it safe for commerce and Anglo settlements. While the military had vast numbers of men to occupy the forts, few of them had the skills to understand this environment and the Native Americans that roamed this region. In 1870, the US Army established the Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts, who were recruited from communities in Mexico. They had the skills the Army desperately needed, such as excellent horsemanship, great tracking skills, and were outstanding marksman with their rifles.

Who were these first-rate riders, marksmen and trackers? They were descendents of escaped slaves who settled among the Florida Seminole Indians and intermarried. How did they come to be close by when the army needed help against the Apaches?

In the late 1830s and early 1840s, the U. S. government moved the Seminoles and Seminole Negroes to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma, which turned out to be a hostile environment for them. Slave hunters and pro-slave Creek Indians began to persecute the Seminole Negroes located there. One band of Seminoles and a band of Seminole Negroes fled to Mexico. The Seminole Negroes stayed in Mexico for fear of being kidnapped and placed into slavery in the United States. Mexico prohibited slavery in 1829 and thus the Seminole Negroes were able to live freely in the Texas-Mexico border region. It was here, as young men, that they learned to ride, hunt and track, developing the skills needed in order to survive in the challenging

environment. They emulated the Plains Indians who had long lived in this region, learning their survival skills.

The United States Army recognized the skills the Seminole Negroes could bring to the military. Although they never numbered more than 50 men, the Seminole Negroes were some of the best troops. They fought in a variety of military campaigns with high praise from their commanding officers. Four of the scouts received the Congressional Medal of Honor for their bravery.

The scouts amassed an impressive record of frontier combat. Meanwhile, these soldiers and their families faced discrimination, racial violence, and governmental indifference. At first, the army fed and housed the Seminole Negroes, and many were led to believe that the government would resettle them on a reservation, but this never happened. Despite the harsh treatment Seminole-Negro Indian Scouts received from civilians and the government, they maintained a high level of effectiveness. They were loyal to the army and proud of their contribution to the United States.

In the summer of 1914, the U.S. Army disbanded the Scouts. At the same time, they were ordered to leave their civilian settlement and were also evicted from the grounds of Fort Clark from which they had once proudly served. Without jobs or a place to go, they purchased a small piece of land near Fort Clark, near present day Brackettville, TX just a few miles north of the tracks. This is where most of the group settled and where many of their descendants reside today.

**Source(s):**

Hoffman, E. J. (2009). A Guidebook To Amtrak's Sunset Limited. New Orleans to San Antonio.

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