

Bicycling Buffalo Soldiers

Fort Missoula's great experiment of the late 1890s

By Michael R. Ritt

On June 14, 1897, 20 African American soldiers commanded by their 25-year-old lieutenant, James A. Moss, departed from their post at Fort Missoula, Montana, to begin a journey of almost 2,000 miles to St. Louis. The group was part of the 25th Infantry Regiment and comprised the first (and only) bicycle corps of the U.S. Army.

A recent graduate from West Point who held two distinctions at the time of his graduation in 1894, Moss was the youngest cadet ever to complete studies at the academy. He was also the class "goat" – a term used to distinguish the cadet with the lowest ranking among all of his classmates. Because assignments after graduation were handed out based on a cadet's class ranking, Moss was given the last pick of a duty location.

Few white officers wanted to command Black soldiers – dubbed "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Native Americans because of their dark, curly hair. Moss was a Southerner from Lafayette, Louisiana, but he had respect for the Buffalo Soldiers and held them in high regard, so he asked to be posted at Fort Missoula.

Moss was an avid cyclist, and cycling was coming into its own after the invention of the "safety" bicycle in 1874, which differed from earlier bicycles because it was chain-driven and both tires were the same size. European armies, particularly in Germany and France, were already using bicycles in a limited capacity for duties such as courier service and reconnaissance. Moss felt strongly that there was a place for the bicycle in military service, so he petitioned General Nelson A.

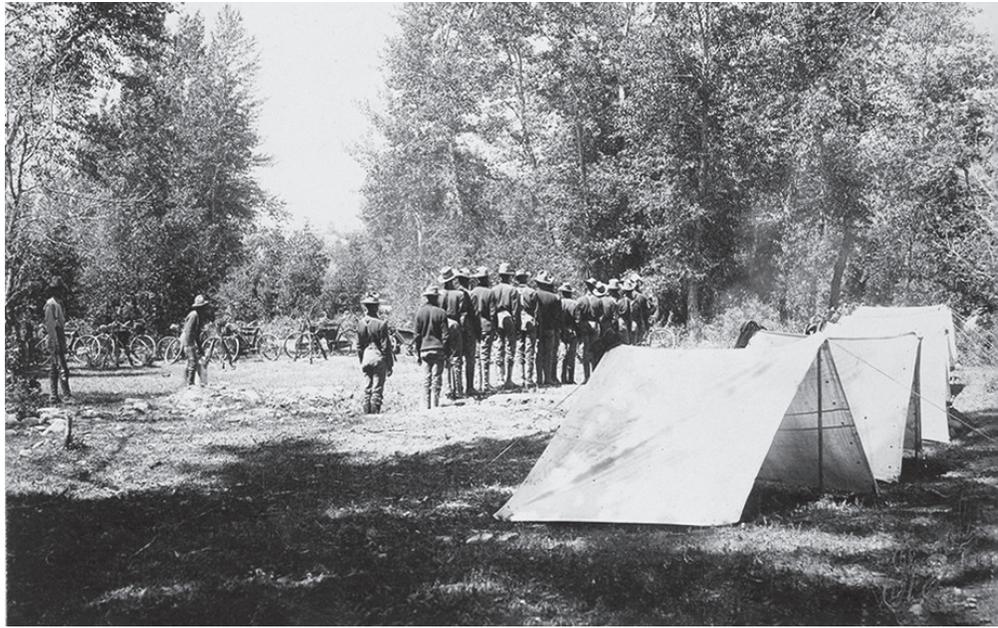
Miles, the commanding general of the Army, to study the feasibility of using bicycles under combat conditions.

Miles also believed that the bicycle could prove useful to the Army, so he tasked Moss with undertaking the study. On May 12, 1896 – Moss's 24th birthday – he was given permission to organize the 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps.

Two months later, the newly formed Bicycle Corps, consisting of eight enlisted men and Moss, departed Fort Missoula on its first cross-country test. The soldiers rode to Lake McDonald, situated almost 130 miles north of the fort in what would become, 14 years later, Glacier National Park. The following month, the Bicycle Corps took a second, longer, and more difficult trip. On August 15, the men departed the fort, arriving 10 days and 500 miles

In the field - the U.S. Army Bicycle Corps stationed at Fort Missoula, Montana. Corps in formation. The man riding beside the two rows of soldiers is Lieutenant James A. Moss. All photographs courtesy of Archives & Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana. Used with permission.





The Bicycle Corps in camp. The men are lined up single file in front of their tents with their backs to the camera. Bicycles are in background.



For the most part, the Bicycle Corps was met by enthusiastic crowds throughout the 1897 journey. This photo was taken at an unknown location.

later at their destination in Yellowstone National Park.

The corps gained valuable experience during these preliminary trips, learning to recognize the limits of both the bicycles and the riders – an experience that Moss used to plan the corps' third and most ambitious test, a 1,900-mile, one-way ride to St. Louis.

The bicycles for the trip were donated to the Army by the A.G. Spalding and Brothers Company of Chicopee, Massachusetts, which was eager to have the Army test Spalding's product. The bicycles were built to military specifications with steel frames and rims and weighed 60 pounds when fully loaded. Each man had to carry his camp equipment and supplies, food rations for two days (there were food caches set up every 100 miles along the route they would travel), a rifle and ammunition.

Moss chose 20 of the 40 enlisted men who volunteered for the assignment, along with the assistant post surgeon. Riding along with the corps was a 19-year-old reporter from the *Daily Missoulian*, Edward Boos, who sent back lengthy and detailed accounts of the journey.

The men of the corps ranged in age from 24 to 39 years. Five of the riders were veterans of the previous year's rides to Lake McDonald and Yellowstone. Most of the men were experienced cyclists, but four of them had never ridden a bicycle before and had to learn to ride before saddling up for the extended journey.

At 5:30 a.m. on June 14, 1897, the soldiers rode out of Fort Missoula. By the time they entered the city of Missoula, north of the fort, the streets were lined with an enthusiastic crowd cheering the corps on its way.

The route that Moss decided on closely followed the path of the Northern Pacific and Burlington railroads. It wasn't long after the soldiers started that rain began falling in torrents, turning the road into a quagmire of mud that slowed the progress of the riders. On several occasions, the riders wound up carrying their bicycles on their shoulders to make better progress. At the end of that first day of their

journey, the exhausted, wet, and muddy men of the Bicycle Corps had traveled 54 miles; twice the distance that cavalry or infantry could have traveled under similar conditions.

The trip lasted 40 days (34 days of traveling and six days of rest), and covered 1,900 miles, averaging 55 miles per day. Of the 1,900 miles traversed, the men of the Bicycle Corps had to push or carry their bicycles almost 400 miles due to deep mud or sand. The corps endured snowstorms, rain showers and blistering heat.

On July 7, the temperature reached 110 degrees in the shade. Many of the men fell ill due to poor water. The only water available to them was in the railroad tanks, but if they were any distance from the railroad, they had to rely on groundwater, which was often alkaline. During one stretch in Nebraska, the riders traveled more than 50 miles with no water.

Once they reached western Missouri, the corps had to deal with a new problem. Resentment still lingered from the Civil War and Reconstruction politics, and many residents with Confederate sympathies had little hospitality to show to a group of Union soldiers, particularly Black soldiers, and refused to let them camp on their farms.

Hostilities waned by the time the Bicycle Corps reached the outskirts of St. Louis, and on July 24, hundreds of members of local bicycle clubs came out to greet the soldiers and escort them into the city. St. Louis and its inhabitants threw a parade for their guests and treated them like heroes. The *St. Louis Star* reported that the journey of the Bicycle Corps “was the most marvelous cycling trip in the history of the wheel and the most rapid military march on record.”

In his report to the War Department, Moss later wrote that the experiment “demonstrated that a bicycle corps could travel twice as fast as cavalry and infantry under the same topographical conditions, at one-third the cost.”

He added: “The bicycle has a number of advantages over the horse; it does not require as much care, it needs no forage, it moves much faster over fair roads ... it is noiseless and raises

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25th Infantry Bicycle Corps crossing a creek at an unknown location.



When confronted with sand or muddy roads, the Bicycle Corps often resorted to traveling along the tracks of the Northern Pacific and Burlington railroads. The soldiers had to carry or push their bicycles for nearly 400 miles of their 1,900-mile journey.

but little dust, and it is impossible to determine its direction from its tracks.”

Despite the success of the Bicycle Corps’ experiment, the Army disbanded the corps when it returned to Fort Missoula, and there was no more serious consideration given to the idea. The country was on the cusp of the Spanish-American War. On April

10, 1898, the 25th Infantry departed for Cuba via Tampa, Florida, as the first Army regiment to be called into active duty in the war with Spain. The Buffalo Soldiers of the 25th Infantry served with distinction on the battlefields of Las Guasimas, El Caney and San Juan Hill.

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