

Museum News: John Lapham Bullis

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The history of Sanderson and Terrell County Texas could not even be told if it were not for the actions of one man in particular...John Lapham Bullis.

In the period before the coming of the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railroad in 1882, the Big Bend of Texas was an inhospitable place. With virtually no surface water, travelers traversing the Edwards Plateau and the Chihuahuah Desert ran the danger of dying of thirst.

But an even greater danger was the presence of hostile Native Americans, who resented any encroachment on their lands. There had been peaceful "Indians" in the area...the so-called "Basket Makers" and others, who lived in pueblo-style buildings and shelters half-dug into the soil. They ranged along the two major rivers of the area, the Rio Grande and the Pecos, and subsisted on farming/hunting/gathering.

The Jumanos, a nomadic trading culture, moved into the Big Bend, along with a group known as the Chisos Indians. There is indication that the two cultures clashed.

But in the time bordering the modern era, bands of Native Peoples began to move into the Big Bend...the Comanches and the Mescalero Apaches. These were hunter/trader nomads who made periodic raids into Mexico for goods, horses and captives. They came into conflict with the native inhabitants and with the Anglo races that were also beginning to explore and push into the Big Bend.

By the 1850s, Texas was plagued with depredations on both sides. Most of Texas was consumed by Indian Wars, and the Big Bend was considered too hostile for settlement. The U. S. Army was sent to quell the uprisings and a series of engagements occurred.

Enter John L. Bullis.

Bullis was a career military man whose involvement in the U. S. Army began with the Civil War. He was born at Macedon, New York, on April 17, 1841. As the eldest of seven children he had significant responsibilities in the Quaker family. Although he was exposed to the pacifist teachings of the Quakers, he was not a particularly religious man. He enlisted in the army in 1862 at the age of 21 and was wounded and captured at the Battle of Harper's Ferry. He returned to duty after a prisoner exchange but was wounded and captured once again at Gettysburg. This time he was confined to the notorious Libby Prison in Virginia, a concentration camp beset with overcrowding and harsh conditions. Here the captives were exposed to disease, malnutrition and a high mortality rate. .



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With his release and exchange from Libby, he made a fateful decision...he joined the 118th Infantry, Colored, and was made a captain. This leadership of black troops would prepare him for life in the Big Bend and command of the Black Watch, the so-called Buffalo Soldiers.

After the war he reenlisted as a 2nd lieutenant in the Army and was sent to Texas, where he had briefly served during Reconstruction. His first assignment was a quiet one along the coast.

He was transferred to the Rio Grande Valley where he began to gain experience in operations against Indian raiders.

At Fort Clark in 1873, Bullis gained command of his Black Watch soldiers and their career in the Big Bend began. He and his men built a solid reputation for removing or chasing the Native Americans from the area.

By 1881, Bullis and his Seminole scouts and others had removed the Indian threat in West Texas. For the first time, settlement could commence in relative safety. The scouts' exemplary record in 40 years' service was 26 operations, 12 active engagements with hostiles and not one scout wounded or lost to hostile action. Three of his heroic scouts received the Congressional Medal of Honor for operations in the area, and another for heroism in the Red River War.

The year 1882 brought two momentous events in the life of the Big Bend. First, the GH&SA Railroad finally crossed the Big Bend, opening up the area for increased settlement. The first great sheep and cattle operations began in the area and huge ranches were established as a result.

The second event, however, absolutely horrified settlers in the area...the reassignment of Lieutenant Bullis to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. The newspapers reported that people in the Big Bend and western Texas were very afraid that the Indians would return if savior Bullis was taken off the scene. He had developed such a solid record of achievement that he was looked upon as a hero and the only one who could properly protect the populace. Letters to the Editor and petitions to the army poured in, and many people were actually frightened at the prospect of losing their beloved Bullis.

But, it was to no avail. Bullis moved on and was rewarded for his years of service to the frontier by the people of Kinney County...two ceremonial swords were presented to him in appreciation of his diligent service to the people of Kinney County and Southwestern Texas.

From 1882 until 1888, Bullis served at Camp Supply in Indian Territory (Oklahoma.) In 1888 he transferred to Arizona and became the Indian Agent for the San Carlos Reservation Apaches. In 1893 he moved to Santa Fe as Agent for the Pueblo Indians and the Jicarilla Apaches.

In 1897 and advancing in years, Bullis was promoted to major and appointed as paymaster at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio. In 1898 he saw active duty in Cuba and the Philippines.

The crowning achievement of his career was being promoted to brigadier general by Theodore Roosevelt, but he resigned his commission the next day and retired from military service.

Brigadier General John Lapham Bullis died in San Antonio on May 26, 1911. He was rewarded posthumously by giving his name to a World War I training base at San Antonio, Camp Bullis.

During his long career Bullis was married twice and produced three daughters. His legacy to them was a sizeable fortune, acquired by careful land deals in the Big Bend. He was a partner with William Shafter and John Spencer in silver mining in Presidio County, and all was made possible by his intimate knowledge of the lands of the Big Bend through nine years chasing Indians throughout its length and breadth. In all, his investments made him a very wealthy man.

Hero or not, John Bullis' legacy of peace in the Big Bend was a lasting one. Without the intervention of Bullis and his Black Watch scouts, permanent settlement of the Big Bend would not have been possible. His work in the Terrell County area enabled Charles Downie and others to move vast herds of sheep and cattle into the area and create the first large ranches. Our prosperity was made possible by his diligence. He truly was an officer, a gentleman and a hero.