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Article Title: Nebraska's "Rough Riders" in the Spanish-American War

Full Citation: J R Johnson, "Nebraska's 'Rough Riders' in the Spanish-American War," *Nebraska History* 29 (1948): 105-112

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1948RoughRiders.pdf>

Date: 3/21/2017

Article Summary: Nebraska's volunteers endured heat, poor food, inadequate drinking water, and disease while they trained in Georgia for several months in 1898. Hostilities ceased before they could be sent to Cuba.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: Jacob H Culver, George A Eberly, Melvin Grigsby, George M Sternberg

Place Names: Camp Thomas, Chickamauga Park, Georgia

Keywords: Rough Riders, Grigsby's Cowboys, Black Hills Squadron (Troop K)

# Nebraska's "Rough Riders" in the Spanish-American War<sup>1</sup>

By J. R. Johnson

**M**OST everyone is familiar with Teddy Roosevelt's "Rough Riders" and how they marched up San Juan Hill to the tune of "There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." Few will recall that Nebraska, also, had some "rough riders" who, through no fault of their own, did very little riding.

There were three volunteer cavalry regiments in the Spanish-American War. The First Regiment, commanded by Wood and Roosevelt; the Second under Judge Torrey of Cheyenne; and the Third led by Attorney-General Melvin Grigsby of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This latter regiment was composed of five troops from South Dakota, four from Montana, two from North Dakota and one, Troop K, from Nebraska.<sup>2</sup>

Troop K, before joining with Grigsby's Cowboys, as the Regiment was popularly called, had been known as Troop A of the Nebraska National Guard. Captain Jacob H. Culver was the officer in charge and he went to great effort with the War Department to have it included in Grigsby's outfit. The state adjutant General and the Populist governor, Silas A. Holcomb, held up action in order to effect some changes in officer personnel.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, Culver had his men encamped at Milford where he, personally, bore the expense of their subsistence between April 26 and May 14, 1898. In the end Culver had

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<sup>1</sup>Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Nebraska in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection, A Study in Imperialism" (University of Nebraska, 1937).

<sup>2</sup>Otto L. Sues, *Grigsby's Cowboys, Third United States Volunteer Cavalry, Spanish-American War* (Salem, S. D.), pp. 1-12.

<sup>3</sup>*Report, Adjutant General of Nebraska, 1899-1900*, p. 1296.

his way relative to officers. His troops marched to Lincoln (no horses) on May 13, making camp at the Fair Grounds (Camp Saunders), and were mustered into the service of the United States the next day as Troop K, First Squadron, popularly called the Black Hills Squadron of the Third United States Volunteer Cavalry.<sup>4</sup>

Orders came to entrain for Chickamauga Park, Georgia, and the troop left for that place May 20 via Kansas City and St. Louis, arriving in Chattanooga, Tennessee, May 22, being the first unit to report for duty. Camp Thomas in Chickamauga Park, a few miles southeast of Chattanooga, was a beautiful spot but unsuited for a military encampment.<sup>5</sup> When the Nebraska cavalrymen arrived they found only confusion. Organization was completely lacking. Full of vim and vinegar, these young horsemen were destined to meet with many disappointments. The heat was terrific. Pure water was both inadequate and difficult to procure. It was often contaminated because of the method of its being secured, hauling in barrels at first. Later, when piped, the water was warm and the men, though forbidden to do so, often drank from open pools. Improper diet and poorly cooked food were further problems. There was no government bakery for several weeks and the troops ate soggy bread baked in buzzacott ovens. Badly cooked meat, which was often spoiled, watery tomatoes and half-rotten potatoes made up the menu. A great deal of the notorious "embalmed" beef was consumed.<sup>6</sup> The most active camp pest was the

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<sup>4</sup>Sues, *op cit.*, pp. 127, 128, 183, 184, 187; *Nebraska State Journal*, May 14, 1898.

<sup>5</sup>Dr. Carroll Dunham, "Medical and Sanitary Aspects of the War," *Review of Reviews*, October, 1898; Walter Reed, Victor C. Vaughan and Edward C. Shakespeare, *Report of the Origin and Spread of Typhoid Fever in U. S. Military Camps during the Spanish War of 1898* (Washington, 1904), I, 285, 286.

<sup>6</sup>Interviews: Jacob H. North, Lincoln, December 30, 1932; Charles M. Sutherland, Lincoln, January 3, 1933; John F. Grau, Omaha, October 17, 1932; and Claude Barnell, Wayne, Nebraska, December 1, 1936. All these men were in the 2nd Nebraska Volunteer Infantry stationed at Camp Thomas. *Lincoln Evening News*, September 21, 1898.

house-fly. "When mess call sounds," said one soldier at Camp Thomas, "it as a scramble between the men and the flies to see which will get the food."<sup>7</sup> Another relates that the flies had to be literally scraped from the food.<sup>8</sup> Eating became a nightmare and the stomachs of the men gave away. This verse by one of the camp "poets" reveals their longings and the depths of their miseries:

Backward, turn backward, O Time in your flight,  
Feed me on grub again, just for a night;  
I am so weary of sole-leather steak,  
Petrified hardtack a sledge could not break;  
Tomatoes and beans in a watery bath,  
Sow-belly as strong as Goliath of Gath.  
Weary of starving on what I can't eat,  
Chewing up rubber and calling it meat.  
Backward, turn backward, for weary I am,  
Give me a whack at my grandmother's jam.  
Let me drink milk that has never been skimmed,  
Let me eat butter whose hair has been trimmed,  
Let me once more have an old-fashioned pie,  
Then I'll be ready to go south and die.<sup>9</sup>

Judge George A. Eberly of the Nebraska Supreme Court was a sergeant in Troop K. He wastes no words in describing the conditions in Camp Thomas. Sanitation was very poor. Latrines were left uncovered, flies swarmed everywhere, waste disposal was unsatisfactory and disease rampant. Hospital care was such that one was likely to suffer more by its use than by staying away. Men pretended to be well and reported for duty rather than take the chance of being sent to the hospital.<sup>10</sup>

Dysentery, malaria and typhoid were the scourges of Camp Thomas. There was a shortage of medical supplies. "Quinine," as one soldier put it, "was the sovereign remedy for everything from a sprained ankle to rheumatism."<sup>11</sup> Poorly trained male nurses, often men whom the

<sup>7</sup>*Nebraska State Journal*, June 12, 1898.

<sup>8</sup>North, Interview cited.

<sup>9</sup>*Lincoln Evening News-Call*, July 21, 1898.

<sup>10</sup>Interview, George A. Eberly, Lincoln, December 27, 1932.

<sup>11</sup>*Lincoln Evening News*, August 22, 1898.

officers wished to be rid of, were used in the hospitals. Susan B. Anthony, speaking in Omaha, October 29, 1898, declared:

The hospitals were full of undisciplined boys who were sick nigh unto death, but Sternberg refused to allow forty trained nurses we had secured to go to Chickamauga, and only let them come after it was fully demonstrated that the men had failed as nurses. Then only was it partially admitted that someone with natural instincts was welcome.<sup>12</sup>

Surgeon General George M. Sternberg is inclined to point to other reasons for so much sickness in Camp Thomas: reduction of the age limit from 21 to 18; the haste of organizing volunteer regiments; ignorance of medical officers; neglecting health measures to give more time to military maneuvers; proximity of a city affording too many opportunities for drunkenness and venereal disease; and lack of trained stewards for hospital duty necessitating the detailing of inexperienced enlisted men. He contended that "not the site (as newspapers allege) but the manner of its occupation" was responsible for the general spread of disease.<sup>13</sup> Most accounts, however, blame the Surgeon General's Office for stupidity in the organization and administration of Camp Thomas.

Nebraska's cavalrymen were poorly equipped at first, says Judge Eberly. They had western horses and these without bridles and saddles. Training was carried on in bareback fashion which was rather an unpleasant exercise. Equipment was gradually secured, however, and at the close of the four month's encampment the troop was well supplied.<sup>14</sup> The Third United States Cavalry was a rather heterogeneous regiment and attracted a great deal of attention. J. O. Berkley, a clerk in Troop K, writes in this connection:

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<sup>12</sup>*Omaha World Herald*, October 29, 1898; see also, *Woman's Weekly* (Omaha) June 10, 1899, and "Letters from Dr. Nickolas Senn," *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Chicago, 1899).

<sup>13</sup>*Report of the Secretary of War for 1898* (Sternberg Report), p. 181.

<sup>14</sup>Eberly, Interview cited.

There are many professional men, business men, students and farmers with us, who are fine fellows to meet. A majority of our regimental officers are West Point men and have had a wide experience in army life. There is much curiosity shown by other soldiers and outside people in the rough riders. Everybody wants to know what they look like, whether they have horns, antlers, or just ordinary whiskers and long hair.<sup>15</sup>

The first formal guard mount was held on May 31. This event was described by a member as follows:

Acting Chief Trumpeter Murphy was in charge of field music, consisting of twenty-four trumpets; but only seven trumpeters could sound a note on the trumpet. The guard was a motley aggregation, due to the fact that but few of the men in camp had uniforms, the others appearing in civilian clothes—some with broad-brimmed hats; a few wearing a miscellaneous assortment of caps and here and there a derby or other stiff hat; some had on black boots and some tan shoes; some wore swallow-tail coats and others had no coats at all. Not a carbine was in the command except those in possession of Troops K and M, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the hot weather and other difficulties the "Rough Riders" made distinct progress in their training. By the end of June the men had brown canvas uniforms and campaign hats. Saddles, halters, nose bags, saddle blankets, watering bridles and carbines gave them a neat appearance and they went through the ceremony of guard mounting like veterans. In less than two months the identity of the cowboy had been lost, and in his place stood a soldier well drilled and fully equipped. Rumors were afloat that they were soon to be sent to Cuba and their spirits rose accordingly, but as the days went by without anything happening a great deal of dissatisfaction developed. Criticism of the "higher-ups" was common.

So the month of July was passed drilling at an average of four hours a day in the boiling sun and fighting mosquitoes and countless insects at night. Every day an order to move would be looked for and every night the officers and men alike would retire disappointed.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>*Ainsworth Star-Journal*

<sup>16</sup>*Sues, op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 37.

The arrival of August found the men more despondent than ever. They had become heartily sick of camping in Georgia. The following parody on "Marching Through Georgia," written by one of the cowboys expresses their sentiments to the fullest extent. He called it "The Cowboy's Lament."

We are waiting, Uncle Samuel, an even thousand strong;  
 We are waiting for the 'forward march' to hump itself along;  
 We are waiting for a chance to fight for country, right or  
 wrong,  
 And not camp down here in Georgia.

We are waiting, Uncle Samuel, awaiting meek and mild,  
 With policin' camp and doin' chores our spirits are beguiled,  
 But what we keep a thinkin' and thinkin' 'till we're riled is  
 Why ain't we moved out of Georgia?

We are cavortin' as camp rangers and doin' park police,  
 And buildin' repytashuns as pious men o' peace,  
 And our sweethearts' farewell letter has tatters in the crease  
 But still we are camped here in Georgia.  
 Our Colonel tried his level best to get us an equal chance,

But still we sit awaitin' here, awearin' out our pants—  
 To which an old maid's longin' is not a circumstance—  
 Yet we ain't marchin' out of Georgia.

So blow your bugle, Uncle Sam, and put it in the blow  
 That this here regiment of ours shall be the next to go;  
 We've beat Job's record waitin'—now, begosh we want a show,  
 So please send us marchin' out of Georgia.<sup>18</sup>

The Regiment occupied two camp sites while at Chickamauga, both described as "notoriously filthy."<sup>19</sup> On August 9 the first grand review of troops took place at Camp Thomas. Forty thousand men of all branches of the service participated, including the cowboy regiment which attracted a great deal of attention. By this time hope of active service had practically disappeared. Grigsby went to Washington and with the aid of the congressional delegations from the four states concerned tried to get action, but to no avail. It appeared, for a time, that the cowboys might be included in the Porto Rican campaign but this, too, fell through. August 10 brought the news that hostilities with Spain had ceased. Rumors were afloat that the troopers might be sent to Cuba for garrison duty. This

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 39, 40.

<sup>19</sup>Reed, Vaughan, Shakespeare, *op. cit.*, I, 270.

was an unpleasant report for few had any "stomach" for such service. A practice march in heavy marching order on August 14 added to their fears. A second "grand review" was carried out on August 17 and "field day" exercises, August 20. Official notice came August 28 that the regiment would be mustered out September 8 though it was the 11th before Troop K was disbanded, being the last troop to leave.<sup>20</sup> The *Chattanooga Times* carried this editorial relative to the regiment:

The Rough Riders, Colonel Grigsby's regiment, who are being mustered out at the park, have made hosts of friends in this city. When they came here everybody was expecting that they would be 'toughs' of the park, more because of the name 'cow-boy's' than from any knowledge anybody had of them. But everybody was agreeably disappointed. They have been among the most orderly men in the park, and have made more individual friends than any command in the park, except possibly the Second Kentucky and Colonel Tyson's regiment (Tennessee).<sup>21</sup>

Grigsby's Cowboys, like all other units stationed in Chickamauga Park, suffered heavily from sickness, especially typhoid fever. The regiment's mean strength was 1,013 and of this number 270 contracted typhoid. Fifteen died in camp, of which thirteen resulted from this disease.<sup>22</sup> The foregoing is, undoubtedly, an understatement as early deaths came to troopers who "vacationed" at Camp Thomas the summer of 1898, deaths that have never been recorded as casualties of war.

The Nebraskans who served with Grigsby's Cowboys never had the spotlight of Rooseveltian publicity cast upon them, but they have every reason to be proud of their tour of duty. Though denied the privilege of actual combat they made every effort to train themselves for effective service. Had they had the opportunity, there is no question

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<sup>20</sup>Sues, *op. cit.*, pp. 38, 43, 45-48.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52. Quoted from the *Chattanooga Times*.

<sup>22</sup>Reed, Vaughan, Shakespearre, *op. cit.*, II, Chart No. 43; Captain Wm. H. Hayward, Letter, April 7, 1933, (in private possession).

but what they would have made military history in the typical Nebraska tradition.

Cowboys, the days of your soldiering's o'er;  
You've returned to your ranges and hills;  
The harsh bugle notes will disturb you no more  
To arouse you to duties and drills.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Sues, *op. cit.*, 352. The Roll of the Dead is given at close of the book.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 54.