

LAST OF THE BLACK WATCH

by J. Troy Hickman

In the town of Bracketville and scattered nearby on both sides of the Rio Grande, live a few survivors of an ethnic accident little known to history, the Seminole Negro Race.

From this tribe, a band of dusky warriors called the "Black Watch" was recruited in 1871 to scout for the United States Cavalry stationed at Fort Clark and engaged in warfare with the Indians. The origin of this unique group goes back to the time when Florida belonged to Spain and its swampy forests were inhabited by Seminole Indians.

Negro slaves from plantations in adjoining states sometimes fled their masters and took refuge with the friendly Seminoles.

The skirmishes which followed when parties of white planters invaded the Seminole country to recover their property led to the Seminole Wars.

After more than 30 years of conflict most of the Seminoles and their black friends moved to what is now the State of Oklahoma.

There they were soon involved in disputes with indigenous Indians who looked upon as intruders.

They moved again, this time south-westward across the Rio Grande into the state of Coahuila, Mexico. Several generations prospered and multiplied, the Indian and Negro blood mingling.

A party of 150 moved back over the river and settled on Alum Creek near Eagle Pass. Here they were waging a discouraging fight for a foothold, when Lt. John L. Bullis, the commander at Fort Clark, found them and enlisted a party of their men in the Fourth United States Cavalry.

Under a treaty with Mexican authorities, Bullis also engaged others from the Coahuila group across the river.

Members of the "Black Watch" did not distinguish themselves in the exact routine of military discipline.

But in less than a year they proved their mettle as experts in Indian warfare by leading the Fort Clark troops into a skirmish around the Kickapoo Spring, where Comanches, Lipans and Kiowas suffered enormous losses.

At its peak, the Fort Clark colony of Seminole negroes numbered between 400 and 500 men, women and children. On the reservation around Las Moras Spring and along the creek they built adobe huts with dirt floors and grass roofs.

The women fished for perch, little boys shot rabbits, and old men raised goats.

Their religion was strangely compounded. Calling themselves Mount Zion Baptists, they held fast seasons and had pageantry during Christmas and Easter, and attended three prayer meetings a week, in addition to Sunday services.

Although fond of pork they had a taboo against it at church dinners. They believed that God sometimes revealed something to a person in dreams.

The black soldiers had a reputation for courage in battle. Yet, when death came to a Seminole negro, it had the intense and protracted attention of the whole colony. Work halted! f. The people would gather at the house of a dying member, for around the clock sessions of prayer and hymn singing. At the cemetery they marched around the bier, weeping, shouting and dancing Indian style.

A frame church was erected on a rocky hill just outside of town

and because a center of their group life.

In the final years of the last century, several local incidents disturbed the precarious peace on both sides of the Rio Grande. Bandits from the mountains of northern Mexico raided ranches on the American side.

The "Black Watch" was called out to guide the federal troops into their hide outs and one of the few scouts living today, George Kibbetts accompanied them. Now 79 years old and blind, Kibbetts spends his time sitting in the sun at Brackettville.

The "Black Watch", was demobilized soon after the turn of the century. The veteran scouts were pensioned, and their families at first were allowed to live on the Fort Clark reservation. But in 1914 the War Department ordered their removal.

A few squatted on unused lands nearby, some returned to Mexico and others just disappeared.

Two miles from Fort Clark is the Seminole Indian Scout Cemetery, established in 1872, where many of the veterans and members of their families are buried. The grave of each scout is marked with a white stone.

Fort Clark is now operated as a guest ranch and all adobe huts inside the grounds where the scouts and their families once lived have been razed. A few, such as the former house of Joe Dickson may still be seen in Brackettville and lonely and crumbling the little frame church still sits on the rocky hill. No services have been held there for years and pigeons roost in the belfry.

The racial identity of the Seminole Negro tribe is dissolving in the erosion of time.