Literature Review: The First United States Volunteer Cavalry

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Abstract:

The First United States Volunteer Cavalry was a highly successful and publicized regiment that fought in the Spanish-American War. There are always discrepancies on the way that historical events are perceived and interpreted the Rough Riders are no exception to this rule. The date of publication, whether in 1899 or 2016, affected the way that authors wrote about the Rough Riders. As time passed, the change from a military focal point transitioned into a more social oriented point of view. This transition brought with it a more diversity-oriented form of socially based study, that changed the focus from whites to include African Americans as well. Although there are many points that each author agrees on, such as the Rough Rider’s bravery and courage in battle along with the insurmountable odds, such as the many diseases like Malaria, Typhoid, and food poisoning, they overcame. Many authors disagree when it comes to the contributions of outside forces, such as minority involvement and their relative success when comparing them to other American military divisions.
The First United States Volunteer Cavalry, also known as the infamous Rough Riders, were a division of the United States Army during the Spanish-American War. The war took place from April to August in 1898. The Rough Riders participated in multiple campaigns throughout the war, including the battles of San Juan Hill and Las Guasimas as well as the Siege of Santiago. These horsemen were made up of a wide spectrum of volunteers, including businessmen, law enforcement officers, cowboys, along with racial and ethnic groups such as African Americans and Native Americans. These men were highly publicized in American newspapers during and immediately following the war, and they were glorified as one of the most influential and important divisions in the United States Army.

There are many monographs and scholarly journals that cover the Rough Riders in relation to one of their leaders, then Lt. Col. Theodore Roosevelt, however about half of these works do not go into much detail about the division’s history. The monographs and journal articles that will be discussed do give different and distinct information about the diverse unit. These monographs and journal articles are published over one hundred years, and literature on the Rough Riders is spread out almost completely evenly with the largest concentration in 1899, immediately following the War. The sources that focus primarily on the Rough Riders give unique and similar insight into the lives of Roosevelt’s men. The sources that will be evaluated are organized by the author’s point of view or original purpose and are sub-categorized by their year of publication in ascending order.

Most monographs look at the Rough Riders through a military historians’ eyes, analyzing the actual impact they had on the Spanish-American War through the battles and campaigns they participated in. Relatively few historians see them as a social phenomenon by looking at the ground-breaking diversity that composed the unit. Although there are some differences in how
certain authors view the Rough Riders, Roosevelt’s men were consistently praised for their heroism, bravery, and hardships that they endured. However, many historians and authors come to different conclusions on the level of training and competence of not only their leadership, but the volunteer unit as a whole, as well as the role that white racial dominance played in suppressing African American heroism.

One of the most prominent authors to write about the Rough Riders, as it pertains to military strategy and effectiveness, is Theodore Roosevelt himself. Roosevelt stepped down from his post as assistant secretary of the navy to serve as a lieutenant-cornel in the First United States Volunteer Cavalry Division. In his book The Rough Riders, which was published in 1899, Roosevelt is quick to brag about his men’s exploits and bravery in many different battles of the Spanish-American War. He does not give as much mention to the diversity of his troops as other monographs published later. Roosevelt’s monograph is used by many other authors in their own works, supporting century long arguments about the Rough Riders’ story. Roosevelt uses his own experiences to highlight some of the most unbearable moments the Rough Riders faced in the siege of Santiago.1 Section V of his monograph is almost entirely devoted to recounting the horrors that the men faced, and how they overcame impossible odds to eventually declare victory over Santiago. His book asserts that the Rough Riders suffered more than their fair share of hardships, but they overcame their tribulations to be the most famous unit in military history up until that point. Roosevelt uses primary sources such as diaries and journals that his solders wrote when they were in Cuba and uses certain passages to describe the life of his soldiers after the Spanish-American War. Throughout his monograph, Roosevelt asserts that some of his

soldiers lacked sufficient training, but the Rough Riders made up for it with their bravery, courage, and intellect.

Another author who published in 1899 is Edward Marshall, who wrote *The Story of the Rough Riders: 1st U. S. Volunteer Cavalry; The Regiment in Camp and on the Battle Field*. Marshall served in the Spanish-American War and was wounded during an engagement in Las Guasimas. Many parallels exist between Marshall and Roosevelt’s monographs, including their unwavering praise of the Rough Riders and the perceived large role they played in the War. He also concludes that the Rough Riders were a superb group of soldiers, even though they may have lacked traditional training that professional soldiers had in the American military. Marshall argues that the Rough Riders could compete closely with any other American in Cuba. He uses primary accounts of the battles, such as personal journals, as well as accounts from Lt. Col. Roosevelt. The author also mentions in detail the terrible conditions that the Rough Riders endured during their campaigns in Cuba. Marshal similarly does not focus or even give an extended thought about non-white soldiers that fought in the War, even within the Rough Riders themselves. Marshal and Roosevelt came up with the same conclusions, likely because they had a similar experience and point of view. Both of the authors served in Cuba and saw the Rough Riders in combat.

In Frank Burt Friedel’s monograph *The Splendid Little War: The Dramatic History of The Spanish-American War* (2002), the author writes more about the Rough Riders than many other books that does not specifically look at them. The author looks at numerous journal sources, along with Roosevelt’s monograph and many other monographs to contextualize the

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Spanish-American War. Friedel’s writing accurately reflects both sides of the War, what people saw (through newspapers and magazine articles) and what actually happened according to some soldier’s primary recounts of many battles that the riders participated in. He looks at the mythos that surrounded the riders during and following the War and attempted to make sense of the almost unbelievable stories. Friedel also looks at other units that fought alongside the Rough Riders in the Cuban theatre of the Spanish-American War. Friedel discusses the similarities and differences between Roosevelt’s famous riders and the various units that they fought with on San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill. Friedel ends his monograph and concludes that the Rough Riders were extremely effective in battle, but it their success was primarily due to their seemingly baseless popularity.

Many authors who focused on Theodore Roosevelt, either through biographies or other independent articles, also wrote about the Rough Riders in their work. One author who wrote about Roosevelt and also the Rough Riders is Douglas Brinkley, who wrote *TR’s Wild Side*. Published in 2009, Brinkley’s article came to the same conclusions as many other authors that wrote about Roosevelt’s unit. Brinkley uses multiple primary accounts of men who served directly under Lt. Col. Roosevelt and affirmed the same information that Roosevelt wrote about in his autobiography in 1899. Although he focuses a majority of his work on the period before the Spanish-American War, Brinkley underscores some of the heroic, and in most cases senseless, sacrifices that Teddy’s men had made. He also took the time to discuss the terrible conditions that the riders had to, not only survive but also fight in. Most, if not all, of the points brought up by Brinkley show up in other monographs that follow the Rough Riders.

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Another prominent monograph about the Rough Riders that looks at their direct contributions to the War effort is Mark Lee Garner’s *Rough Riders: Theodore Roosevelt, His Cowboy Regiment, and the Immortal Charge up San Juan Hill*, published in 2016. Garner sees the Rough Riders as a unit that had failure constantly looming overhead but is for the most part left out. Garner concludes his monograph in a similar fashion to other books published during the twenty-first century, he also looks at the demographic make-up of the unit, and how media in the late nineteenth century portrayed them. He concludes that even though the Rough Riders were poorly trained, they were successful due to their courage and bravery, despite periodic failure on the part of the leadership. The author cited one soldier who recalled saving the Rough Riders after they had foolishly over-extended into enemy territory. He also looks at several different aspects of not only the First United States Volunteer Cavalry itself, but also how individual soldiers that participated in certain battles, focusing on the battle of San Juan Hill. The author is quick to mention and elaborate on how diverse the group Roosevelt had put together, and briefly touched on the idea that having such a diverse unit would shatter the idea of white superiority on the battlefield. One of Garner’s minor arguments is that the simple presence of the Rough Riders was enough to muster morale and that they created a pseudo competition between the riders and other regiments that were fighting by their side. The author uses the accounts of other soldiers from the 10th Cavalry that raced the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill.\(^5\) The author also used primary documents to show that the riders were ‘smiling’ while presumably racing to their deaths.

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While many authors decided to focus more intensely on the impact that the Rough Riders had on the War, a select few chose to see their diversity as a new challenge to the fallacy of racial superiority that was a part of the United States in the late nineteenth century. One of these authors is Christian Bold, who published an article titled *Where Did the Black Rough Riders Go?* In the Canadian Review of American Studies in 2009. Bold argues that one reason that the diversity of the unit was overlooked was that it challenged the false sense of superiority that white men (and in this case soldiers) had over their racial minority counterparts.\(^6\) The author also argues that many accomplishments of minorities, primarily African Americans, were suppressed to such a degree that it changed the way that the public would view them. He cites the story of the Rough Riders over-extending into enemy territory and being rescued by another regiment of soldiers.\(^7\) He also notes that, at the time, proper credit was not given to the almost entirely African American unit that rescued them from their own mistake.

Another author who shared a similar point of view is Andrew D. Amron, who published *Reinforcing Manliness: Black State Militias, The Spanish-American War, and The Image of The African American Soldier* in 2012. He argues that African American stories of heroism was suppressed because of the idea of white superiority over other racial groups.\(^8\) The author does


\(^7\) Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders*. Mark L. Garner, *Rough Riders: Theodore Roosevelt, His Cowboy Regiment and the Immortal Charge Up San Juan Hill*. The example being examined is also mentioned in Garner’s and Roosevelt’s monographs. Although Garner gives credit to African American soldiers for their rescue, Roosevelt only mentions that the unit is of a different regiment, failing to give full credit to the minorities involved.

not focus exclusively on the Rough Riders or even the Cuban theatre, he looks broadly at the role of African American militia that fought across the world. Amron looks at many secondary (book) sources, including Roosevelt’s recollection of the events of the Spanish-American War to prove his idea of suppression.

There are many gaps in the publication of pertinent monographs that focus on the Rough Riders specifically. Some monographs were published immediately following the Spanish-American War in the late nineteenth and extremely early twentieth century. Many of these works focused heavily on the military impact that the rough riders had on certain battles and the War in general. One reason for this hotspot of writing is the fact that the First United States Volunteer Cavalry were highly publicized in American media during and immediately following the Spanish-American War. Another time when many works were published was around the one hundred-year anniversary of the conflict. Many of these monographs and articles focus more on the diversity and contributions of minority soldiers that also volunteered for Roosevelt’s Rough Riders. This trend can be seen in many major events that take place as a part of American History. There are seemingly random and unrelated publications in the mid twentieth century, which could be a result of the increasingly popular civil rights movement. The trend in the literature seems that the later the publication, the more likely the author is to give the credit that African American soldiers rightly earned fighting for their country in Cuba.

The main area where gaps in research occur are other ethnic and racial minority groups. Most monographs mention Native Americans but do not go into detail about the unique role that they played in the Rough Riders or the Spanish-American War as a whole. Cuban Americans are also left out in many of these monographs, possibly relating to the likely suppression of minorities from the mainstream media, such as newspapers, in the late nineteenth century. There
are relatively few monographs that cover, in depth, the role that Cuban American citizens had in the Cuban theatre of the War.

New research continues to become available about not only the Spanish-American War, but the Rough Riders specifically. These new works focus more on the social side of the Rough Riders, similar to Mark Lee Garner’s *Rough Riders: Theodore Roosevelt, His Cowboy Regiment, and the Immortal Charge up San Juan Hill*, which was published only three years ago in 2016. These new monographs and journal articles could continue to provide invaluable insight into the daily lives and social interaction between the Rough Riders, their families, and the people around them. There are clear trends between the type of study that is done about the Rough Riders over time, starting on a military focus and leading to a more social one. Authors unanimously agree that the Rough Riders were a brave and courageous group of diverse individuals that overcame insurmountable odds (diseases like Malaria, Typhoid, Yellow fever, and food poisoning) to achieve victory. However, there is a clear divide amongst historians about contributions of certain minority groups, the precise skill they possessed, and the overall impact they had on the Spanish-American War in Cuba.
Bibliography


From volunteering with horses on a ranch in Wyoming, wildlife conservation in the marshes of Florida and the wild mountains of Colorado, or assisting with youth development in the south, there's a project out there to meet any level of experience, interest, or duration requirement. Unique to the United States are the opportunities to volunteer with specific native American populations -- from the Navajo in the south to a myriad of tribes in the Pacific Northwest. Excited yet? Then let's take a look at just a few of the volunteer programs operating throughout the U.S. -- both through this Be the first video. Your name here. Customer reviews. 3.8 out of 5 stars. 3.8 out of 5 customer ratings. 5 star. Reviewed in the United States on July 11, 2019. why cant this book be reproduced so its readable? I am having trouble getting through it because of the light shade and splotchy typeface Very disappointed because it seems to be a great narrative written at that time period. Read more. Helpful. Comment Report abuse. See all reviews from the United States. United States Cavalry. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. United States Cavalry. Cavalry branch plaque. Active. In autumn, after much training, Johnson's Volunteers, as they had come to be called, clashed with the British 45th Foot along the Thames River, 90 miles east of Detroit. The training and the tactical leadership of Col. Johnson resulted in the surrender of the British. Congress combined the First and Second United States Dragoons into one Regiment of Light Dragoons on 30 March 1814. This was a cost cutting measure; it was cheaper and easier to maintain one unit at full strength than two organizations that could not maintain a full complement of riders. The signing of the Treaty of Ghent at