

Child of the Fighting Tenth: On the Frontier with the Buffalo Soldiers

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Review

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Hooker, Forrestine C. and Wilson, Steve, Editor. *Child of the Fighting Tenth: On the Frontier with the Buffalo Soldiers.* Oxford University Press, \$25.00 ISBN 195161580

Child of the plains:

Memoir of a cavalry officer's daughter

Born in 1867, Forrestine Cooper grew up on frontier posts throughout the American west. As her Civil War-veteran father, Charles Cooper, made the agonizing ascent from lieutenant to major in the claustrophobic post-war army, he hauled his little family from Oklahoma to Texas to Arizona to New Mexico. As an adult, Forrestine wrote nine books for young adults about her western experiences (indeed, her writing style reflects the straightforward, sometimes dramatic style employed by writers for young people). When she died in 1932 she was writing her memoirs, which comprise the bulk of **Child of the Fighting Tenth**.

Here is what this memoir is not: it is not the story of a typical Victorian child; Forrestine normally had few toys and fewer playmates and, aside from a few terms at a school in Philadelphia, her formal education was limited to post schools. This is not a chronicle of a happy American family; Forrestine's mother remains rather aloof throughout, and although her Major Cooper seems to have been a warm, even playful father, there are few scenes of the family interacting together. Finally, although Forrestine spent her entire childhood with the Tenth Cavalry, one of the famed Buffalo Soldier regiments, there is virtually no mention of race (although she does occasionally express admiration and fondness for her father's troopers).

But this *is* a fast moving, chatty account of the hardships and excitement of the peace-time army. Forrestine's father goes on countless patrols, gets lost and nearly loses his command to thirst on the Staked Plains of Texas, and sees his

most important action during the 1885-1886 campaign against the Apaches, when he captures Mangas, the last remaining Apache chief. The author includes many scenes that she did not witness, including military campaigns that occurred while she attended school back East. Although she describes Native Americans sympathetically, only a few come to life, including the legendary Quanah Parker, the Comanche leader who became fast friends with the Coopers, and a nameless young Apache scout who developed a crush on Forrestine and serenaded her one night from below her balcony. The narrative also captures the close-knit relationships formed by frontier army officers and their families. One old friend was Tom Custer, who would die with his more famous brother on the Little Big Horn in 1876.

Forrestine never clarified why she loved this life her father had chosen for her, but she clearly cherished it. Like the children of Elliott West's *Growing Up With the West: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier* (1989), she loved the wide open spaces and nearly suffered a breakdown when she was sent to Philadelphia for schooling. Although most of the black soldiers in her father's unit remain faceless and unnamed, her affection for them appears from time to time. On one occasion, in a vignette reminiscent of a scene from Thomas Wentworth Higginson's famous *Army Life in a Black Regiment*, she and her father sneak up on his troop and eavesdrop on their talking and singing. She no doubt loved being the center of attention; her father's friends and commanders—including Col. Benjamin Grierson and Gen. Nelson Miles—made her something of a pet, and when she left her father's camp on her way to be married—in the midst of the Apache campaign—the entire troop gathered to sing to her. As the adult Forrestine declares on page 48, I never knew a monotonous day during my long years of frontier experiences. Each day held its own interest.

Editor Steve Wilson rounds out **Child of the Fighting Tenth** with a brief but useful biographical introduction, lists of pertinent sources and of historic sites related to events described in the book, and a chronology of the Cooper family's' experiences. Although there is little new information about the Indian wars of the 1870s and 1880s, life in the frontier army, or western children, this graceful little memoir is a well-written and briskly told adventure story that resembles more than anything else the books for young adults written by Forrestine Cooper long after she left the frontier she had loved so much.

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