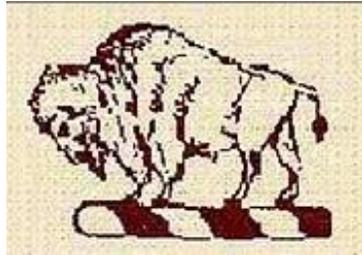


Reuben Aaron Waller

1840 – 1945



Reuben Aaron Waller was born into slavery in Kentucky on January 5, 1840. His age is a matter of record; many plantations kept a system of registering slaves' birth and ancestry. Through records kept by white midwives, Reuben established his birth date as January 5, 1840.

His first memory was the falling stars in 1849, which led slaves and masters alike to fear a soon-coming Judgment Day. He also remembers hearing about the 1856 Border Rebellion War (between Kansas and Missouri), followed by the Great Comet of 1860, just before the Civil War. "We all got scared at the comet as its tail reached from West to East. It did look frightful. As we think of it now we believed it was a token of the great Civil War and the completing of our freedom, 400,000 of us," he later recalled.

In El Dorado, Waller lived at 816 S. Atchison. He outlived four wives, raising his six children to become responsible, well-respected citizens.

His father was a distiller and young Reuben began learning the art of making whiskey when he was ten years old. Eleven years later when the Civil War broke out, he and his father were "sold South" to help make whiskey for Confederate troops. Together they brought \$2,800 on the auction block. When he was over 100 years old, Waller still carried a small memento of his life as a slave – a thin dime minted in 1839, part of the purchase price once paid for his grandfather.

As the Civil War wore on, he became a body servant for a Confederate general in the Civil War, following his master into 29 battles. He was present at Appomattox Courthouse to hear the weighty discussions between General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant, and saw Lee surrender his sword to Grant.

Reuben remembered seeing white soldiers on both sides rush to their opponents in that hour, embracing one another. He saw a million former slaves suddenly given a birthright. "Never," he said, "was there such a cosmic display of love as was shown at Appomattox on that day."

Waller told how the South's forces were compelled to surrender by starvation. Defiantly, he claimed that Lee's army was made up of the "fightingest" men that this or any other country could produce. He said the starvation was brought about by the conduct of slaves destroying their masters' establishments, having been inspired by northern propaganda.

Military life appealed to Waller. While with Stonewall Jackson's cavalry, he had engendered a great liking for the cavalry soldiers. He enlisted in the army in July of 1867 at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to fight in the Indian war then raging in Kansas and Colorado.

Stationed fifty miles off Chief Black Kettle's reservation in 1870, he witnessed Custer plowing through the encampment. Riding over the battleground on a later day, to his undying sorrow Rube Waller viewed the bodies of women, children and braves lying frozen in the snow. He declared that that was one of the most uncalled-for, bloody assaults in the history of the nation. Because of this action, Chief Rain-in-the-Face declared that he would "cut out Custer's heart", a promise made good six years later at "Custer's Last Stand".

Traveling the famous Chisholm Trail twice, Waller remembered it as a swath a quarter mile wide wherein there was not one sprig of grass, bare as a floor from thousands of cattle taking care of any vegetation that might have grown there.

Remarkably intelligent with a keen memory, acute mental and physical faculties, he had not suffered any serious illness since his slavery days. He claimed that the early hardships of slavery left him willowy and strong, able to withstand any future strain.

A devout Bible student, he was a living example of "live and let live", practicing the Golden Rule every day to the best of his ability. One of his greatest pleasures was to have good, friendly people drop in for a chat.

Asked if he thought his race had benefited, he cited a case in point: a few weeks earlier there had been a meeting at the El Dorado courthouse. In that meeting, he raised his voice as a free man, capable of making his own way, in his own way. "Once," he said, "we were bound for life to nothing. Now," he emphasized, "we are bound to life by everything."

"My race has now, in my lifetime, come from underneath to where it has produced some of the greatest artists on the modern scene. Culturally, artistically and economically, my race now has given our good United States some of the very finest personalities and intellects that can be found. I am not only happy – I am proud to have lived, through thick and thin, this great transformation of my people."

Reuben was a charter member of the CME (Colored Methodist) Church, once located in the 300 block of North Main; he also was an ordained minister. He was remembered for his honesty, deeply believing that your word was your bond. He attributed his long life to plenty of rest, abstinence from harmful drinks, hard work and eating good, wholesome food.

Waller died on August 20, 1945 following an illness of only a few hours. He was 105 years, 7 months and 15 days of age. Three sons, two daughters, sixteen grandchildren, thirteen great-grandchildren, and one great-great grandchild survived him.

In his time as a Buffalo soldier, Reuben became acquainted with many legendary figures of the Old West, including "Buffalo Bill" Cody, serving as Brevet Major General Eugene A. Carr's chief scout, "Wild Bill" Hickok and Jack Stillwell, both also serving as scouts. His acquaintance with these and other well-known pioneers made his name well known throughout the West. He also knew George Custer, though his opinion of the General was low.

A tall man with a long white beard, Reuben was a familiar figure on the streets of El Dorado, driving a two-ton weather-beaten dray wagon drawn by a white horse. As he drove down the street, all the kids seemed to know him and he was kind to them. Dr. Gene Williams later recalled how he and his brother, Wade, as boys spent long hours with Mr. Waller, listening to his tales as a Buffalo Soldier of the old west. This probably had an influence on the art produced by both in later life.