

History Mystery

UNVEILED

RETIRED TEACHER UNCOVERS
PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN HISTORY
OF BLACKS SERVING IN CIVIL
WAR'S WHITE REGIMENTS

By Kim Bower-Spence

JUANITA PATIENCE MOSS '58 RECALLS LAYING flowers on the West Pittston, Pa. grave of her great-grandfather each Decoration Day when she was a girl. As American Legion members led a parade for what we now call Memorial Day, her family made sure the youngster knew escaped slave Crowder Patience had served with the Union Army in the Civil War.

The retired biology teacher didn't think much about that part of her family history until she noticed a *Washington Post* article in 1998. It invited descendants of black Civil War veterans to a symposium coinciding with the unveiling of the African-American Civil War Monument. Moss, living just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C., in Alexandria, Va., searched a National Park Service database of United States Colored Troops (USCT) and was surprised to find no record of her ancestor. Before she headed to the symposium, Moss combed the contents of an old box given to her by Patience's daughter. Discharge papers revealed the regiment in which he

served, and she was able to find his name listed as a Union soldier.

At the symposium, she stood before politicians, archivists, historians and authors to ask why they weren't also honoring black men who served in white regiments. "Because there weren't any," she was told.

"Oh, yes there were. I know of one: my great-grandfather," she recalls telling the assembly. She pulled his discharge papers from her briefcase. "You could tell by the looks on their faces that this was entirely new information to them."

The mystery launched a search that would divert Moss from a quiet retirement in which she had planned to learn Spanish and quilting. Instead, the 74-year-old has mined Civil War records to research Patience and other black soldiers in white regiments.

"She's done a good job of digging," confirms Wilkes University history professor Harold Cox. "The evidence is there. She's proven to my satisfaction that there were integrated units in the northern army."

Moss learned that Patience enlisted in the 103rd Pennsylvania Regiment on Jan. 1, 1864, in Plymouth, N.C., serving as a cook. In April 1864, this Union regiment was among 16 that fought Confederate troops in the Battle of Plymouth. All Yankees were killed or captured, but Moss' grandfather apparently escaped. "He had not deserted," she confirms.

After the war, he ventured north to Harrisburg, Pa., to collect his last pay from the Union Army. Patience married and eventually made his way to West Pittston, where he raised eight children in the predominately white community.

Savoring the mystery, Moss refuses to reveal how he got away. The answer is in Moss' first book, "Created to be Free." She wrote this fictional account of Patience's life because she lacked enough details to write a biography. "He didn't discuss his former life in slavery at all."

That doesn't mean the book lacks a historical basis. Cox helped fill in Civil War facts, and Moss did extensive research. Moss has discovered 1,000 black Civil War soldiers in white regiments so far, and she plans to keep looking. After writing "Created to be Free," she was encouraged to write the nonfiction "The Battle of Plymouth, N.C., April 17-20, 1864: The Last Confederate Victory" and "Forgotten Black Soldiers in White Regiments During the Civil War."

At the encouragement of a friend who appraises African art, she authored "Anthracite Coal Art of Charles Edgar Patience" about her father's work. Moss is a frequent speaker at historical societies, universities and other organizations from Connecticut to Florida. Besides recounting history, she offers workshops on "Becoming Your Own Family Storyteller."

Moss has no interest in encouraging others to write "Mommy Dearest"-type books that air family skeletons. "Overcoming — those are the stories that need to be told. And every family has them."

Juanita Patience Moss

Alexandria, Va.

BA, Secondary Education 1958

Career: High school biology teacher, New Jersey

Notable: Amateur historian revealed previously unknown fact that black men served with white regiments in the Civil War

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Above: Moss has learned of at least 1,000 black soldiers who served in white Union regiments during the Civil War.

Insets: Photos show Moss' father, coal sculptor Charles Edgar Patience. Crowder Patience's grave can be found in West Pittston Cemetery.

PHOTOS BY HOWARD KORN AND KIM BOWER-SPENCE