

A PROFILE [EXCERPTED]:

Shelton Johnson National Park Service U.S. Park Ranger

Year Reported/Quoted: 2011

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> The scenery in Shelton Johnson's life changed drastically and often while he was growing up, but one theme remained constant: the natural world. The younger of two children in a military family, Johnson lived at various points throughout the United States, spending time in Detroit, South Carolina, California, Kansas City, and abroad in Germany and England. It was in Germany that he first remembers feeling a strong attraction to nature. "The Black Forest wasn't very far from where we lived, and even at a young age it made a deep impact on me," Johnson recalls. Later, while the family was living in places far from the wild, Johnson found other ways to maintain that connection. Growing up in Detroit's inner city, wilderness seemed pretty far away, he says. But there was always public television with its programming which focused on environmental issues such as wildlife, wetlands, wilderness conservation, national parks whose programs kept alive the spark of wonder that burned inside me, that fascination for all things wild.

> Johnson stayed in Michigan for his undergraduate, earning a bachelor of arts in English literature from the University of Michigan in 1981. He then joined the Peace Corps and served as an English teacher in Liberia, West Africa, where the sight, smell, and feel of the tropics made a profound impression on him. After Liberia, that spark that I had always felt became a flame, and it was getting stronger with each encounter with the natural world, Johnson says. Though he decided next to pursue another love, poetry, by enrolling in a master of fine arts program at the University of Michigan, his desire to return to the wilderness proved strong, and one summer during graduate school he decided to try working at the Old Faithful Inn at Yellowstone National Park. Its impact was intense. "I woke up as a full human being in Yellowstone," Johnson states. "When it was time for me to return to Ann Arbor, I literally couldn't leave Wyoming." Instead, Johnson became a ranger at Yellowstone. He felt, and continues to feel, that his goals, and those of the National Park Service (NPS), have a natural confluence.

> Johnson's first job for the National Parks Service was at the West Gate Entrance Station at Yellowstone. As a gate ranger, his job was mainly to collect entrance fees, but the setting and the role he played allowed Johnson to keep it from becoming tedious. There was an aura of romance to being a gatekeeper, even a mythical framework that surrounded my daily duties, he says. "When I was on duty, I was the first person to welcome visitors to Yellowstone National park, the world's first national park. I worked the boundary between two worlds--an outside one of practicality and commerce, and an inside one of ideas and poetry. "I felt like Charon, the ferryman of Greek myth who transported souls for a price across the River Styx into the underworld, except that I collected ten dollars so that people could enter an earthly paradise." Johnson is currently a park ranger in the Division of Interpretation and Education in Yosemite Valley, where he regularly presents interpretive programs about the parks nearly forgotten Buffalo Soldier history. He has also given similar presentations in locations all over the U.S. Johnson notes that while he has not advanced at all in his career in terms of climbing the organizational or corporate ladder, he advanced greatly in the art of presenting information to the general public "so much so that I've been asked to speak at Interpretive Trainings in other National Parks. Public speaking is an art form, and I practice it daily. My ambition is to continue to improve as a storyteller." □

> Johnson cites his ability to combine a love of storytelling with history and the natural world as a career highlight, for which he has received numerous honors and awards. He was chosen as keynote speaker at the **National Association of Interpreters**™ Workshop in 2003, was awarded the **Regional Freeman Tilden Award** (the highest award for interpretation within the national Park Service), and most recently won a Cultural Heritage Award from the **Center for Law in the Public Interest** in Los Angeles. Johnson was also interviewed by filmmaker Ken Burns for his documentary "**America's Best Idea: Our National Parks**," which aired on **PBS** in 2009. Despite the recognition he has received for his abilities as an interpreter; Johnson names his efforts to bring the story of the buffalo soldiers in the Sierra Nevada back to life as his single most significant career achievement. **The Fresno based Shelton continues to present his interpretive program, "Yosemite: Through the Eyes of a Buffalo Soldier," at venues throughout the country, and maintains a website devoted to the Buffalo Soldiers. SEE: <http://shadowsoldier.wilderness.net>**