Buffalo Soldiers in Alaska: Company L, Twenty-Fourth Infantry, by Brian G. Shellum, chronicles the experiences of a company of African American infantry posted to the territory of Alaska between 1899 and 1902. Shellum is an independent historian, a retired army officer, and former Defense Intelligence Agency analyst who has previously written extensively on the role of African American regular army soldiers in the late nineteenth century, colloquially known as Buffalo Soldiers, giving him extensive knowledge of the matter at hand.

The thesis of the book is that Company L of the Buffalo Soldiers played a crucial role in a transitional period for Alaska and the city of Skagway. They helped break down racial barriers between the small African American community and the white supremacist majority, earning appreciation for their professionalism and accomplishments. However, they were not able to permanently alter the racial dynamics. Guarding the Alaskan status quo during border negotiations with the British Empire, their role proved more successful in the long term.

The book uses official army records, diaries, memoirs, and newspaper articles, along with secondary sources, to reconstruct the experiences of African American soldiers in Alaska. It covers the daily life of soldiers, including the boredom of garrison life, the motivations of individual soldiers, and the relationships between enlisted men and commissioned officers. The book also explores the events occurring in Alaska at the turn of the century and the interactions between the majority white population and the Buffalo Soldiers.

Shellum chronicles the three years the company served in Alaska and intersperses the military missions of the company with historical events that contextualized or affected their mission, from the fallout of the Spanish-American War and the end of the Klondike gold rush to the border disputes with British Canada and the daily changes in Alaska brought on by technological and political change. The author draws a vivid picture of the end of the Alaskan frontier as it transitioned from one era to the next.

The book intertwines the stories of African American soldiers from Company L and their white officers with those of Skagway’s citizens. It explores how the townspeople initially reacted to the US Army garrison’s presence and how they eventually formed a symbiotic relationship with it, resulting in an economic upswing typical of garrison towns throughout history. The Buffalo Sol-
diers not only began a small black community in Skagway but also broke down racial barriers by displaying military professionalism, interacting with the townspeople in their daily lives, participating in festivities, and playing baseball, America’s favorite pastime.

One of the book’s greatest achievements is providing readers with a deeper understanding of the daily life of soldiers stationed in a remote location during a transitional period. The book also offers insights into the lives of African American soldiers and highlights their treatment by both the army and the civilian world, often revealing stories about bar brawls, prostitution, and the gritty reality of army life. The soldiers are portrayed primarily as soldiers, which allows readers to get to know them on a human level. Despite coming from all walks of life, the soldiers did not see themselves as special and chose to become soldiers for various reasons, ranging from having nothing better to do to being accomplished career soldiers. By detailing the minutiae of peacetime garrison duty, such as sentry duty, the book paints a vivid picture of these soldiers and their daily experiences removed from the mythical, romanticized image often associated with Buffalo Soldiers. The tragedy of the Buffalo Soldiers, as revealed throughout the narrative, is that they were never simply allowed to be just soldiers, as white soldiers were. Drinking, gambling, prostitution, and brawling were all activities known throughout the army, but the soldiers of Company L were frequently put under a microscope by the inhabitants of Skagway and the other temporary garrisons, tolerated during their presence but never truly welcomed and quickly forgotten once departed at the end of their tour of duty.

In terms of criticisms, the book may appear unfocused at times, jumping back and forth between the minutiae of military life and Alaskan history. While its purpose becomes clear as the narrative unfolds, military historians and local historians may be equally frustrated by the lack of focus on one or the other subject. What lets the book down the most is its most understandable omission: more primary accounts by the Buffalo Soldiers themselves. Most of the agency in the book is given to the white officers and the local newspapers and officials from which Shellum tries to reconstruct the narratives of the soldiers. This reflects the white supremacist society of the time that suppressed African American voices and made it necessary to piece together historical accounts from crumbs left over by white voices.

Overall, *Buffalo Soldiers in Alaska* is a well-researched and thought-provoking study of a relatively unknown period in American history through the perspective of a marginalized group of men, whose role is slowly but surely being revealed. As a result, Shellum’s work makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of research around the Buffalo Soldiers.
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