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Photographs / Images: a Fort Robinson guard and his two prisoners from the Sixth Cavalry on work detail about 1897



A Fort Robinson guard and his two prisoners from the Sixth Cavalry on work detail, about 1897. NSHS-H216.5-13

The Sidney Telegraph of Saturday, July 18, 1885, carried the following front-page feature about mysterious goings-on at Fort Sidney. As an uncommon variation—the guard who goes over the hill with his prisoners—on an all too common theme—desertion in the frontier army—it can almost be classified as a “man bites dog” story.

Queer Case. Desertion of a Soldier Guard and Two Convicts

One of the singular cases that sometimes happens in the army occurred at Fort Sidney this week when Private Willis, of E company, deserted while guarding two prisoners, military convicts who were working about the grounds, allowing the prisoners to escape with him. Wednesday afternoon about 4 o'clock the guard and convicts stopped in front of E company's quarters and the guard went inside a few moments. That is the last time anyone seems to have noticed them. The theory is that they went to the stables from the quarters, and worked themselves into town, either going up the creek or down and around by the stock yards. When in town they had an opportunity to change their clothing and get assistance. Whether or not they had any money is a question of surmise. Up to the present writing nothing has been heard from them although the roads north and south have been watched and trains going both ways examined.

The authorities are very anxious to capture these men. Their official descriptions are as follows: Reardon, thin man, dark complexion and hair, gray eyes, twenty-three years old, five feet and one half; Schulz, German, fair complexion, gray eyes, brown hair, five feet seven and a fourth inches; Willis, ruddy complexion, blue eyes, brown curly hair, speaks low, tattooed on nearly every part of body, one tattoo chain around neck.

Willis served five years in F company and was discharged on the 23d of March 1883. He re-enlisted January 17th, 1884, in E company, making six and a half years of service. A few years ago, while stationed at Fort Walla Walla, Washington territory, he purchased a piece of land which became quite valuable. Since coming to Sidney he sold his land at Walla Walla and is said to have secured a piece of railroad land eight miles north of Sidney. Ever since his arrival in Sidney he has been a dissolute character, going to the dogs at a rapid rate, but making an effort at times to reform. Last Saturday he

went to Captain Miles, his company commander, and told him that a party in town was building a house on his land and trying to get it away from him, or at least there was some dispute about it, and asked the captain to allow a certain member of the company to go out and help him establish the corners. The captain consented to this and the two men left, returning that day or the next to the garrison. The theory is that Willis sold his interest in the land and used the money thus obtained to assist himself and his two companions to escape. The men in the company do not all believe that Willis has deserted, some thinking that he might have been disposed of in some way by the prisoners, but as he was armed with a shotgun and under orders not to take the prisoners outside the grounds, the desertion theory is the only plausible one.

The two convicts had been sentenced to three years imprisonment each. Schulz was a deserter from the Seventh cavalry. Reardon deserted from troop C, Fifth cavalry, in March, 1883, and gave himself up to the military authorities in Omaha on the 23d of November 1884.

What happened to the trio is unknown.—Ed.