



A History of Old Fort Mitchell

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Article Summary: Fort Mitchell was small and did not last long, but in its time it was a vital link in the chain of army posts on the settlers' way to the West. (Mattes delivered this address on the one-hundredth anniversary of the first travel on the Oregon Trail.)

Editor's note: The biographical information on the author that follows the article originally appeared elsewhere in this issue of *Nebraska History*.

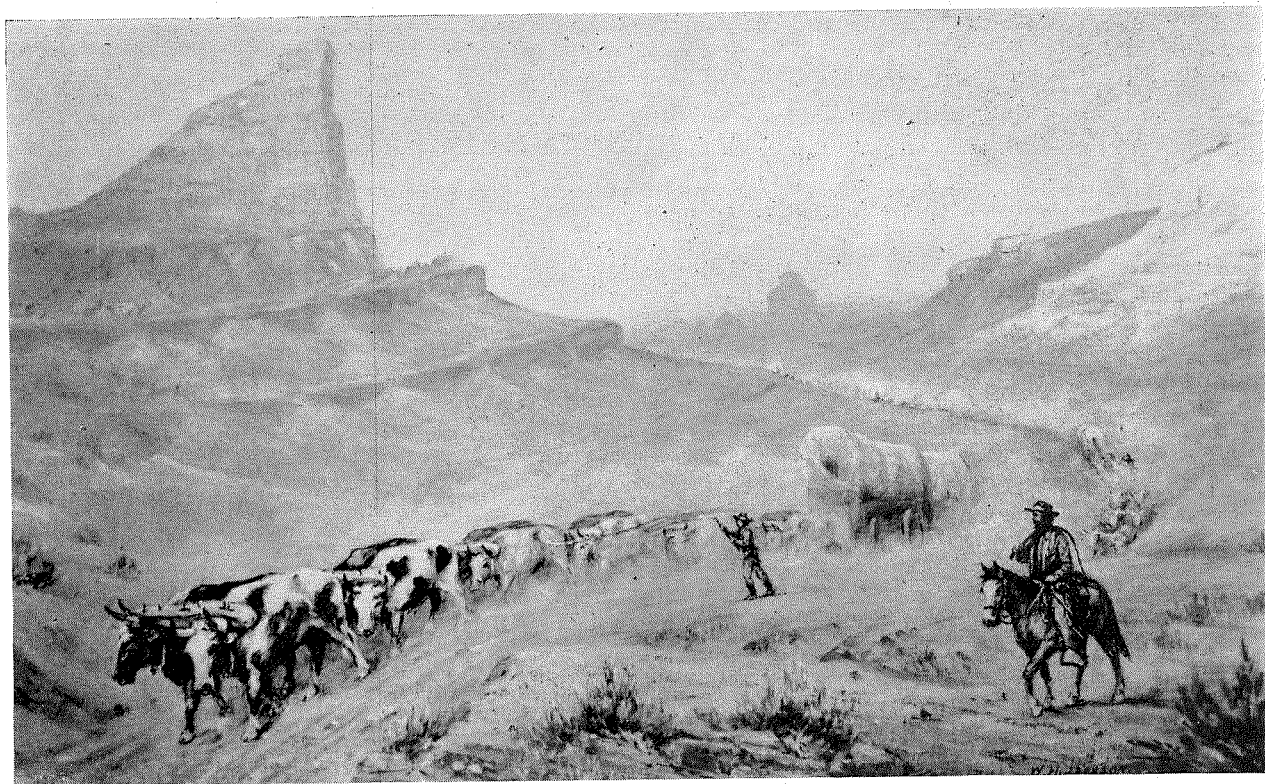
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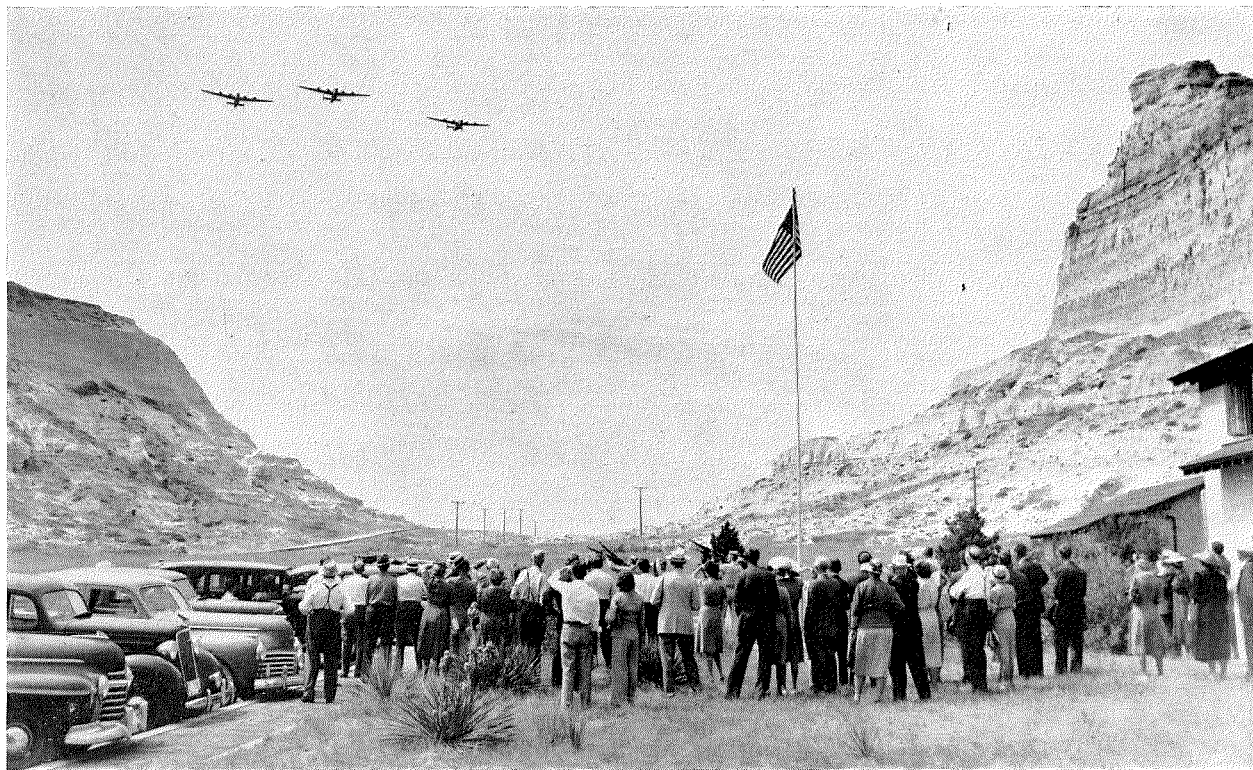
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Photographs / Images: Mitchell Pass at Scotts Bluff, showing the Oregon Trail in 1866 (from a painting by W H Jackson); Scattering Ashes of Captain Edwin Willard Deming along old Oregon Trail at Scotts Bluff, August 15, 1943; Mitchell Pass, looking southeast (the trough of the old trail west of the Pass is still visible); Fort Mitchell in 1866 (from a painting by W H Jackson)



MITCHELL PASS AT SCOTTS BLUFF
From Painting by W. H. Jackson

Courtesy National Park Service



Courtesy Downey's Midwest Studio

SCATTERING ASHES OF CAPTAIN EDWIN WILLARD DEMING ALONG
OLD OREGON TRAIL

A History of Old Fort Mitchell

MERRILL J. MATTES

Custodian, Scotts Bluff National Monument *

Today, August 12, 1943, we are assembled to fulfill a patriotic purpose, to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of the first great migration of Americans to the wilderness of Oregon. The State of Oregon is observing the occasion in befitting style by contributing posts of redwood native to that state, to be driven into various points along the Oregon Trail—the great natural highway of the westward migrations.

The Oregon Trail was so named because the Oregon country was the destination of the earliest emigrants. It roughly consisted of the present states of Oregon, Washington and Idaho, a vast fabulous land of rich natural resources which today is fulfilling the promise of the pioneer. But Nebraska, too, is part of the Oregon Trail, over five hundred miles of it up the valleys of the Little Blue, the Platte and the North Platte into the State of Wyoming. Nebraska has innumerable places of historic interest made illustrious by their association with the Oregon Trail—camp sites, springs, river crossings, landmarks, stage stations, trading posts, and military posts of the United States Army.

For this ceremony of remembrance we have chosen a Nebraska setting of natural beauty and historic significance surpassed by none along the entire route of the Oregon Trail. In the background is Scotts Bluff, one of the great landmarks of the West, dominating the valley of the North Platte, preserved since 1919 as a National Monument and visited annually by thousands of American citizens as an historic shrine. And we stand at the site of old Fort Mitchell, where history was made in terms of blood, and clashing sabers, echoing rifle fire, shrill curdling Indian warcries, the galloping of hoofs, wagon wheels creaking and groaning and rolling westward.

* Address delivered at the Scotts Bluff program of Oregon Trail Centennial.

Fort Mitchell was not very large and it didn't last long. From the standpoint of fame it was not in the same class as Fort Kearny or Fort Laramie or Fort Bridger. In fact, we know surprisingly little about it at all, only bits of written and pictorial evidence and reminiscences which have filtered down to us through a screen of seventy-five years. There is today seemingly no trace whatever of remains of the fort, and what archeological evidence there may once have been has been carried away by generations of enthusiastic relic-hunters. Yet, perhaps we can here get a glimpse of Fort Mitchell when it was a vital link in the chain of Army Posts, lonely and dangerous, which once comprised "The Western Front" of America at war.

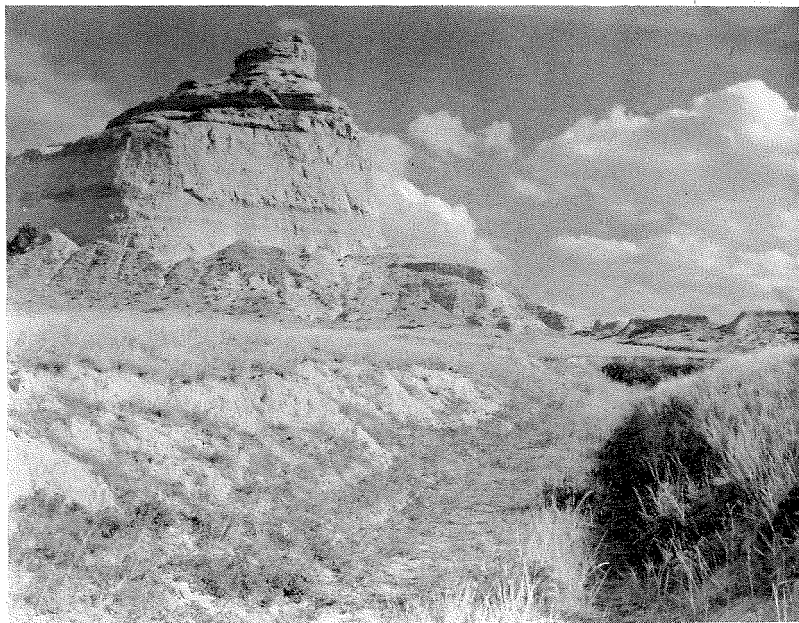
In the earlier days of emigration the Plains Indians were not the constant menace which Hollywood has contrived to make us believe. The missionaries and explorers and fur-traders of the 1830's were friends and allies of the Indians, and the emigrants to Oregon and Utah, who passed here in the 1840's, were generally allowed to proceed peacefully. But the California gold rush of 1849, with its torrent of humanity toiling over the trail, destroying the grass—that was an ominous thing. It foretold endless emigrations of palefaces, destroying the great buffalo herds which constituted the Indian's staff of life, the primary source of food, clothing and shelter. The 1850's comprised a decade of unrest and sullen smoldering resentment by the proud, fierce Indian warriors, seeing their vast hunting grounds spoiled by the men of the Covered Wagon Caravans. In 1851 a great peace council was held at Horse Creek, about twelve miles west of Scotts Bluff, between Commissioners for Washington, D. C., and Indians from all the tribes of the Plains; but the resultant treaty, like most Indian treaties, proved worth no more than the paper it was written on, due to the pressures of white man's greed and Indian's hate, which no treaty could confine. Hence came the Grattan massacre of 1854 near Fort Laramie, the Harney massacre of 1855 at Ash Hollow, and other occasional clashes.

When Civil War broke out in 1861 the Indians had an opportunity to indulge in open organized warfare, since the frontier garrisons were weakened in the call to arms to save the Union. Thus the 1860's became the decade of Indian warfare, and it is this violent period which saw the brief but dramatic career of old Fort Mitchell.

In April 1860 the Pony Express was inaugurated, following the Oregon Trail route past Scotts Bluff. In July 1861 daily stage-coach service was started on this route, and in October 1861 the first transcontinental telegraph line was completed, terminating the Pony Express. These tremendously important events in the conquest of time and distance had the effect upon the Plains Indians of a declaration of war. From 1861 on, emigrant trains and stage stations all along the Oregon Trail were frequently attacked by Indian raiders, mainly Sioux and Cheyenne, while only an inadequate handful of soldiers were stationed at Fort Laramie to combat them.

It was in 1864 that Fort Mitchell came into being as an outpost of Fort Laramie. It was named after Brigadier General Robert B. Mitchell, at that time commander of the military district of Nebraska, which extended from the Missouri River to South Pass. He was born in Ohio, became a citizen of Kansas, in the Civil War was Colonel of a Kansas Regiment, and distinguished himself in the Battles of Wilson Creek and Perryville. He was reportedly a tall and very handsome man, with a full, dark brown, curly beard and mustache. He had a dignified bearing which greatly impressed the Indians in their Councils. For these facts, and the exact circumstance of the founding of Fort Mitchell, we are mainly indebted to Captain Eugene F. Ware in his book *The Indian War of 1864*, although other sources confirm them. There is no evidence that Fort Mitchell or any other fort existed at this site until 1864, despite some undocumented assertions which have been published to the contrary.

Early in 1864 General Mitchell held a series of councils with the Sioux at Cottonwood on the South Platte River, but could get no promises of peace. So he proceeded up the Platte River road with 160 of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry and some Pawnee, reaching Fort Laramie on July 27. This was garrisoned by three companies of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry. Realizing that the Oregon Trail was gravely threatened, he determined to set up new military posts at Julesburg, Mud Springs (south of present Bridgeport), Ficklin's Spring (near present Melbeta) and Scotts Bluff. Captain Shuman of the Eleventh Ohio was ordered to build the fort near Scotts Bluff. On September 1, 1864, Ware left Fort Laramie with General Mitchell on the way to Julesburg. He writes:



Courtesy National Park Service

MITCHELL PASS, LOOKING SOUTHEAST

The trough of the old Trail west of the Pass is still visible in this 1943 photograph.

On our road down we passed Camp Shuman. The men were busy building sod quarters with adobe trimmings on the North Platte River bank, south side, three miles west of the gap at Scotts' Bluffs. Captain Shuman had just received a box marked "Saint Croix Rum Punch" and he opened a bottle in our honor. He introduced us to his First Lieutenant, named Ellsworth, and showed us the outline of the proposed walls which they were hurrying to build before cold weather set in . . .

On October 30, 1864, Ware again visited Camp Shuman, which was now designated "Camp Mitchell," since Captain Shuman had by then named it after General Mitchell. He reports that it was manned by one company of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry. A full company in those days consisted of around one hundred men, although on the frontier the ranks were always badly depleted. Probably not over sixty were stationed at Mitchell. Captain Shuman's superior was Lieutenant-Colonel William O. Collins with headquarters at Fort Laramie. For patrolling the entire North Platte sub-district, from Mud Springs to South Pass, a distance of over 400 miles, Colonel Collins had altogether not over 500 able-bodied men, against thousands of angry savages, apt to strike anywhere at any time. And they struck frequently, killing soldiers and employees of the stage and telegraph line, burning down stations and telegraph poles, and running off with the stock.

On November 29, 1864, hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians were massacred at Sand Creek, Colorado, by volunteers under General Chivington. Enraged, a large band of Indian warriors, including Sioux, early in 1865 converged on Julesburg and sacked it and then went on a rampage. When they advanced on Mud Springs February 4 word was telegraphed to Fort Laramie, 105 miles to the west. Colonel Collins ordered Lieutenant Ellsworth to proceed there with Company H from Fort Mitchell. Marching all night, he reached Mud Springs at day-break with thirty-six men. Colonel Collins with 120 men traveled all night from Fort Laramie to Fort Mitchell. Here he was compelled to leave part of his men, who were badly frozen, and the following night he proceeded to Mud Springs. After these reinforcements arrived, the Indians attacked on February 5 in overwhelming numbers but were successfully repulsed by the bravery of the enlisted men and their skillful sharp-shooting. The troops followed the Indians up the North Platte, and several

Bloody skirmishes took place, but the Indians finally fled across the river and disappeared. It is thought that there over 2,000 Indian warriors engaged while there were less than 150 soldiers, yet there were at least forty Indian dead to two soldiers lost. This was surely a victory for the men of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry, to be outnumbered so overwhelmingly, fighting in bitterly cold weather, yet to stand off the rampaging horde of savages.

Fort Mitchell figured in another Indian battle of 1865. A band of Sioux Indians who had remained friendly to the whites were encamped at Fort Laramie. It was decided to send these peaceful Indians to Fort Kearny, so as to remove them from hostile influences. On June 11th the Indians (numbering around 1500) were headed east with an armed escort of 135 enlisted men under the command of Captain W. D. Fouts of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry and four other commissioned officers, Captain Wilcox and Lieutenants Haywood, Smith and Triggs. The cavalcade proceeded slowly, with suspicious signal smokes appearing from the north side of the Platte. On the morning of June 14th, after leaving the encampment at Horse Creek, the Indians made a sudden treacherous break for the north side of the river, killing Captain Fouts. In the subsequent fighting directed by Captain Wilcox, three enlisted men were killed and four wounded. At least thirty Indians were killed. Subsequently Captain Shuman, Eleventh Ohio Cavalry, arrived from Fort Mitchell with reinforcements, but too late to take up the pursuit against the Indians who by now had safely crossed the river. The troopers, left without any peaceful Indians to escort, proceeded to Fort Mitchell empty-handed. It is believed that hostile Indians across the Platte encouraged the "peaceful" ones to revolt, though probably the Sioux had some fear of approaching the country of their hereditary enemies, the Pawnee. The four victims of Indian treachery were buried at Fort Mitchell at that time, but in recent years their remains were transferred to Fort McPherson.

In 1866 Fort Mitchell was still very active. A civilian traveller, Julius C. Birge, tells us at this time that —

At Fort Mitchell there was stationed a company of soldiers to impress upon the Indians the idea that the strong military arm

of the U. S. Government extended over the West. As we learned later, three-score soldiers were but a feeble menace to the thousands of dissatisfied warriors who were then roaming over the plains, awaiting some assurance from our authorities that the last of their ancient hunting grounds would not be invaded or traversed by the whites.

Apparently Birge did not even stop at Fort Mitchell. He was much more interested in the fossil-beds at the foot of Scotts Bluff, and spent considerable time clambering around the cliffs. A much more useful reporter was the wife of Colonel Henry B. Carrington, who accompanied her husband on his famous expedition of 1866. With 2,000 troops and a train of 226 mule teams, destined to garrison the Powder River Country, the Carringtons reached Scotts Bluff on June 11. Mrs. Carrington gives us this picture:

Almost immediately after leaving the Bluffs, and at the foot of the descent, after the gorge is passed, we find Fort Mitchell. This is a sub-post of Fort Laramie of peculiar style and compactness. The walls of the quarters are also the outlines of the fort itself, and the four sides of the rectangle are respectively the quarters of officers, soldiers, and horses, and the warehouse of supplies. Windows open into the little court or parade-ground; and bed-rooms, as well as all other apartments, are loop-holed for defense.

The "gorge" referred to is, of course, Mitchell Pass, the only possible route for wagon trains through Scotts Bluff. It was approximately two and one-half miles from this Pass to Fort Mitchell, all down hill and rough going.

Another visitor to Fort Mitchell in 1866 was John Bratt, a famous frontiersman, who at that time was a young bull-whacker with a freighting outfit. He tells us:

We finally wended our way, through a crooked, narrow pass, through Scotts Bluff. Two miles west of these bluffs, standing on the south bank of the North Platte River, was Fort Mitchell, a two-company adobe post. Directly south of this, across the overland trail, stood the Mitchell Road ranch and stage station kept at this time by John Sibson.

Bratt's destination was Fort Phil Kearny on the Bozeman Trail. He returned from there to Fort Mitchell late in December. Here he was instructed by his employers to remain and assist Sibson in the operation of the road ranch. Here he remained until September 1867, and his adventures here, which he

relates in some detail in his autobiography, *Trails of Yesterday*, provide us with the most intimate glimpses we have of Fort Mitchell at that time. We can touch only the highlights.

"... Mr. Sibson agreed to pay me \$40.00 per month and I was to make myself useful at anything.

One thing I disliked about the road ranch was that Jack Sibson kept a Sioux squaw ostensibly to do the cooking, with which Mr. Sibson, the stage tenders and I often helped, especially when the stage coaches came in filled with passengers, some of whom were very prominent people, who had, however, left their frills at home. The road ranch was large, built of cedar logs, and had seven fair-sized rooms besides the store. It had dirt floors and roof. It had a large corral built out of cedar logs set closely together, some three or four feet in the ground and standing eight feet high above the ground, with port holes on all sides. The large log stables were built to accommodate the stage stock and emigrant travel and were located inside the log corral or stockade. We milked a number of cows, butter selling readily from fifty cents to seventy-five cents per pound. There were also a goodsized bunch of ponies and some work cattle and horses. These were kept for trading purposes.

There were several Indian tipis pitched outside but near the corrals. A large one was occupied by John Hunter, a white man who had married General Garner's squaw wife by who Mr. Hunter had several half-breed children. The other tipis were occupied by relatives and friends of Mr. Hunter's Indian family. The fort across the road was garrisoned by two companies of the Eighteenth Infantry under Captain Hughes. One company had been mounted. His garrison was kept busy protecting the stage coaches, road ranches between Fort Laramie and Pole Creek, and freight and emigrant trains, and keeping up the overland telegraph line built by Edward Creighton and others.

During pleasant days the stock was allowed to graze outside in charge of a herder and was corralled at nights. The store carried the usual stock of a ranch — clothing, provisions, including canned goods, and plenty of whiskey, much of which was adulterated behind closed doors by Mr. Sibson. He would never let me into this secret but I think, from observation, much of the adulteration was tobacco juice. He also sold buffalo robes, elk and deer skins, harness, saddles, guns, revolvers, ammunition, and many other articles too numerous to mention.

Mr. Sibson, without exception, was the stingiest man I ever met. For a time the officers at the fort took their meals at our ranch, but the food and cooking became so bad they had to quit. For transient guests, going through by stage coach or otherwise, who desired meals and lodging, the quality was some better, canned goods being used more or less. Deer, elk, buffalo and bear meat and bacon would be fried, and salt, cream of tartar and soda would be used in the biscuits. The beds, made on the dirt floors, consisted of buffalo, elk and bear skins, with whatever could be found for a pillow. Ladies did not mind in the least if their bed covering adjoined that of another bed occupied by some strange man, especially if their husbands or relatives were along.

I remember Brigham Young's sharing my bed for two nights. He was on his way to Salt Lake by stage coach and awaited the arrival at our ranch of a Mormon train that he had passed on the other side of Chimney Rock. He was one of the nicest and most sociable men I have ever met. No one could know him and not like him.

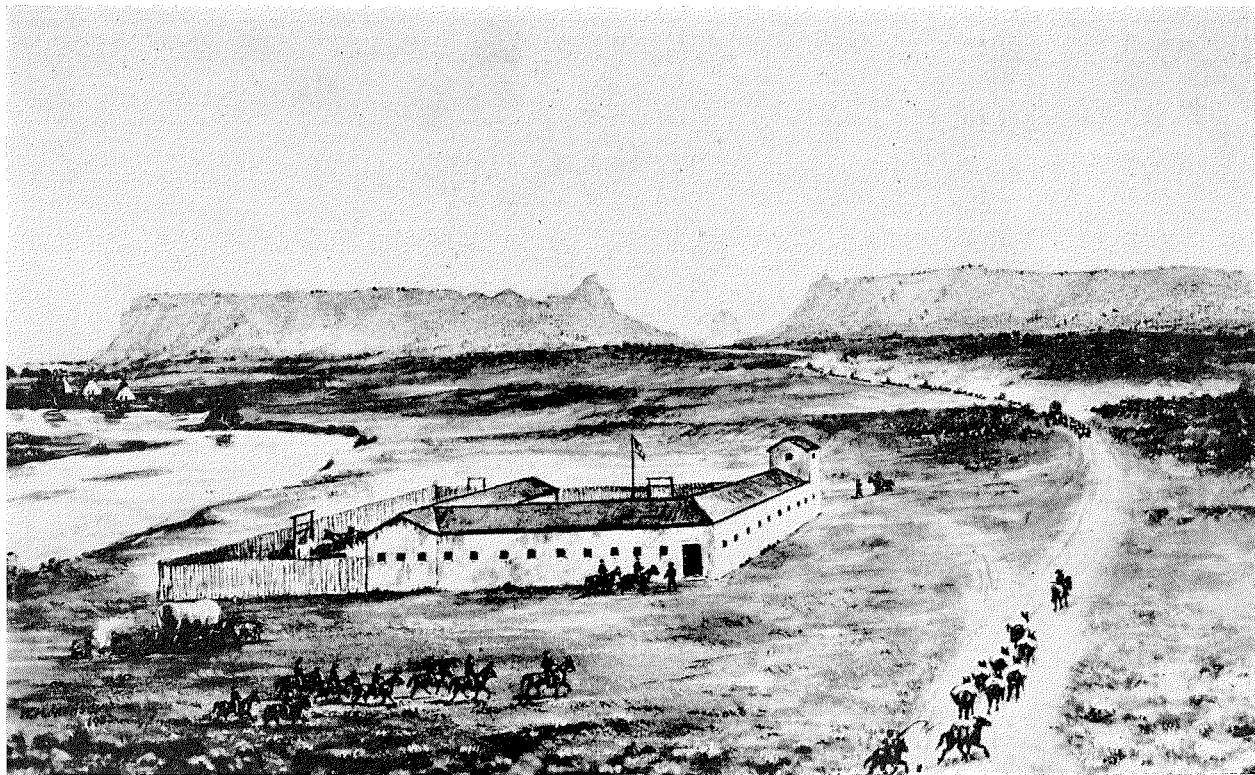
When the telegraph wires were not working between Fort Laramie, our ranch, Mud Springs or Pole Creek, and stage coaches were not making their usual trips, I was often called upon to carry dispatches to these different points. My trip to Fort Laramie, fifty-five miles distant, was usually made in eight or nine hours, either day or night, the latter being preferable. To make these sometimes dangerous rides I selected the best horses in our bunch. I could tell of some exciting trips that I was called upon to make in this work. On the night Mr. Gilman and Mr. Kountz lost their twenty-eight four-mule teams while camped within a quarter of a mile of our ranch and Fort Mitchell, the stage coach coming from Laramie or Reynolds' stage station was chased the last five miles of the road up to the door of the ranch by a large bunch of Indians, said to be Big Mouth's band of Sioux. One dead passenger was in this coach.

Hairbreadth escapes from skulking Indians, robberies, feuds, murders and much crude horseplay are also described in detail, which give the impression that there were no dull days at old Fort Mitchell.

In February 1867 the Carringtons reached Fort Mitchell on their return trip from Fort Phil Kearny, from which Colonel Carrington had been relieved as an upshot of the Fetterman massacre which had occurred in December. Mrs. Carrington relates that after a fifty-three mile trip from Fort Laramie, "two or three days of rest (at Fort Mitchell) passed delightedly, as Captain Hughes of the 18th, and Assistant Surgeon Cunningham, nephew of Lieutenant-General Cunningham of the British Army, were our excellent and willing entertainers."

How long beyond 1867 Fort Mitchell survived is not known. No later accounts pertaining to it have been found. It can be supposed that the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868, terminating Indian warfare on the Bozeman Trail, restored peace to the North Platte Valley sufficiently to justify the abandonment of Fort Mitchell and other outposts of Fort Laramie.

In 1871 the Red Cloud Indian Agency was temporarily located about twenty miles west of Scotts Bluff, about at the intersection of the North Platte River and the present Nebraska-Wyoming line. Here there were located several thousand Sioux,



Courtesy National Park Service

FORT MITCHELL IN 1866

Showing Scotts Bluff, Mitchell Pass, and "The Monument" between

Cheyenne and Arapaho, but they were peaceful; and in 1873 the Agency was moved north. Although hostilities broke out again in the seventies in Wyoming and the Dakotas, the North Platte Valley was not affected. The wild Indians of the Plains were gone—the same proud warriors who once hunted vast herds of buffalo in this valley and fought valiantly but hopelessly against the white invader. With their passing Fort Mitchell had fulfilled its purpose and it was abandoned, returning to dust and the mystic world of memory.

What picture can we recapture, what vision of this tiny outpost in a hostile wilderness? Mrs. Carrington has given us a brief glimpse of the Fort Mitchell stockade, but there is little else in print to suggest its appearance in the 1860's. Fortunately, two eyewitnesses of artistic ability have left us sketches of the post, both apparently made in 1866. One is a rather crude drawing by Bugler C. Moellman, Company G, Eleventh Ohio Cavalry, and is reproduced in *The Bozeman Trail* by Hebard and Brininstool. A more expert drawing was made by the famous pioneer artist, William H. Jackson, whose one-hundredth birthday is now being celebrated, and who at the time was a bull-whacker with a freighting outfit. Both of these drawings are preserved in the library of Scotts Bluff National Monument, while in the museum there is a third sketch of Fort Mitchell, based on these earlier two. All of them show a rectangular adobe fort, with portholes for defense, a sentinel's tower at one corner, and an adjoining log stockade or corral for horses. Looking southeast toward Scotts Bluff, the North Platte River is at left, the emigrant road or Oregon Trail on the right of the post, emerging from the break in the bluffs known as Mitchell Pass.

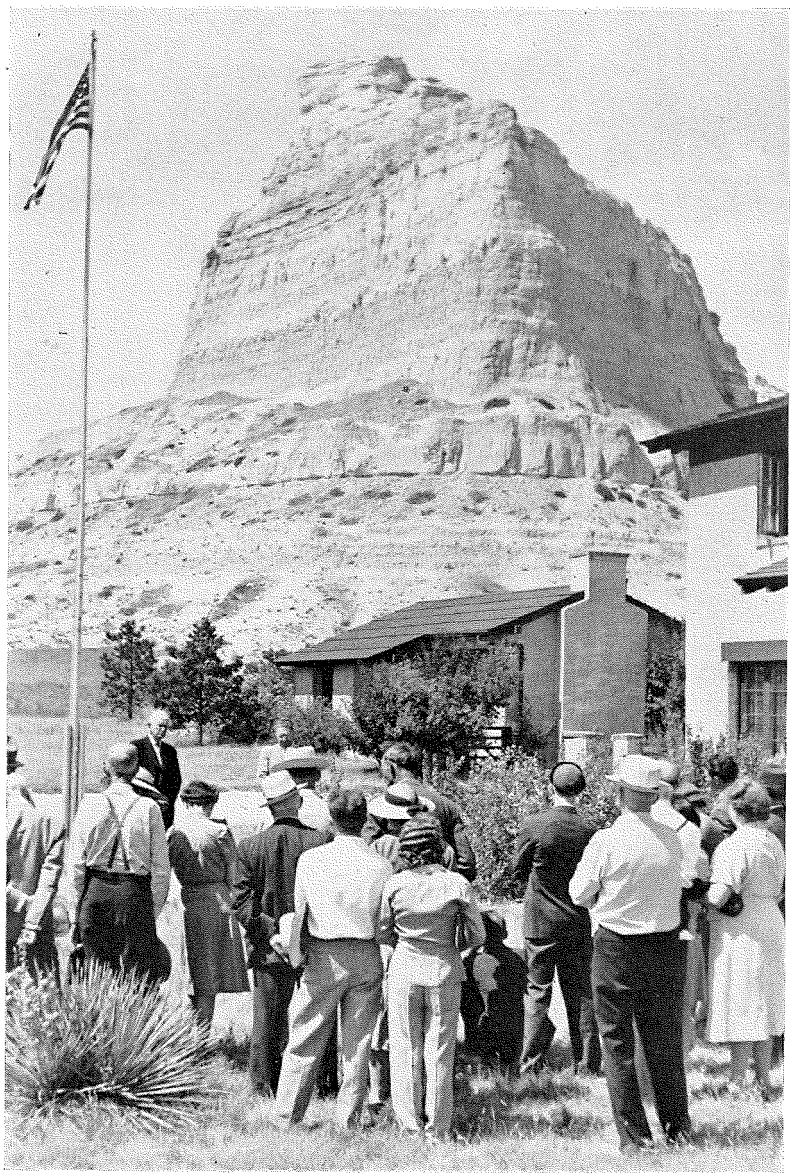
But in addition to these pictures we have some structural data compiled by Colonel William O. Collins in 1864. This includes a detailed plan of the post, with the dimensions and uses of each room or section. Likewise, there is the report of early settlers as to the appearance and configuration of the remains. One of the most reliable recordings was made in 1910 by Mr. Robert Harvey, of the Committee on Marking Historic Sites appointed by the Nebraska State Historical Society, whose recommendations resulted in the erection of the granite marker which

now stands here. In 1910 he determined from the ruins that the adobe stockade was roughly rectangular, about 90 x 140 feet, and suggested that the wooden corral adjoining had been destroyed by fire. Judging from Colonel Collins' map, the post was really somewhat larger than this, the adobe stockade having an over-all dimension of about 100 x 180 feet, with room sections 16 feet wide, a parade ground enclosure 66 x 164 feet, and the adjoining log corral, 30 x 166 feet. According to Harvey the north wall bore 30 degrees west, or about diagonally with the present State Highway 86-A adjoining the site. We have therefore some kind of a picture of Fort Mitchell, and it is hoped that some day a small-scale model of this frontier post can be made for the Scotts Bluff Museum.

Fort Mitchell, named in honor of General Mitchell, an intrepid frontiersman and Indian fighter, is consigned to history. But its name is perpetuated in the modern city of Mitchell, the prosperous farmland of Mitchell Valley, and in Mitchell Pass, the Oregon Trail gateway through Scotts Bluff. We do well to honor the little band of soldiers who once lived here, who fought and died in the wilderness to hold the Western frontier for our American civilization.

FORT MITCHELL REFERENCES

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DR. DRIGGS DEDICATING JACKSON MEMORIAL
Scotts Bluff, August 13, 1943

Custodian of Nebraska Treasure

MERRILL J. MATTES, who delivered the Fort Mitchell address which is reprinted in this issue, has been an employee of the National Park Service of the U. S. Department of the Interior for eight years. With the exception of one season as a temporary ranger at Yellowstone National Park, he has spent these years in Nebraska as historian and custodian of Scotts Bluff National Monument near Gering. This is one of the most popular historic shrines in the West. During the five years of 1938-1942 there was an average of 80,000 visitors at this park annually, ascending the famous Scotts Bluff Summit Road and visiting the Oregon Trail Museum.

As custodian, Mr. Mattes is responsible for the administration, protection and maintenance of the national monument, an area of about 3,200 acres. But in addition, for the past few years he has served as Historical Technician for the National Park Service, undertaking many historical research projects relating to Scotts Bluff, Fort Laramie in Wyoming, and other sites associated with the Oregon Trail. The fascinating and epic story of the fur traders, the Indian fighters and the covered-wagon emigrants — that is the story which Mr. Mattes studies and tells, so that Americans of today can understand their heroic past and perhaps derive inspiration therefrom.

To round out the personal record, Mr. Mattes is thirty-two years old, was born in Congress Park, Illinois, has studied at Missouri, Kansas and Yale Universities, is married, and has two children.