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Article Summary: When most U.S. Army units withdrew from the frontier to fight the Confederates, Indians believed that they could drive the settlers from their land. Small disputes festered and skirmishes grew in intensity until the Indians were plundering and murdering throughout the region.

This article is continued in a later issue:

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# Indian Raids Along the Platte and Little Blue Rivers, 1864 - 1865

*Leroy W. Hagerty*

## I

In 1864 Nebraska was a frontier territory. Thousands of emigrants had passed over its travel routes, but comparatively few had stopped to make permanent settlements within its borders. The settlements which had been established were located along the Missouri, the Platte and the Little Blue Rivers. The population of the territory at this time was over 30,000.<sup>1</sup>

Along the Missouri River were the only towns of any importance. The first of these towns was Dakota City, located in the northeastern part of the present state of Nebraska. Here the United States land office was established; the United States court was held, and at various times soldiers were stationed to protect the frontier from Indian raids. Further down the river were Omaha, Plattsmouth and Nebraska City. Omaha had a population of about fifteen hundred inhabitants; and was the principal outfitting place on the Missouri River for the western mines. Here was located the territorial capital. Plattsmouth and Nebraska City were typical river towns. These towns, like Omaha, were terminals for overland travel. They did an extensive freighting and outfitting business. After Fort Kearny had been abandoned in 1846, Nebraska City was

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison Johnson, *Johnson's History of Nebraska* (Omaha, 1880), p. 170. This history gives the population of Nebraska Territory in 1860 as 28,841.

made a military depot and shipping point for supplies to the western military posts.<sup>2</sup>

Out on the south side of the Platte, two hundred miles west of Omaha was the Fort Kearny settlement. It was located at the junction of two roads, one coming west from Omaha along the Platte River, and the other from Fort Leavenworth. In 1848 Fort Kearny had been moved from Table Creek (Nebraska City), on the Missouri River to this point on the Platte to furnish protection to the travelers on the Oregon Trail.<sup>3</sup> The military post consisted of about a dozen buildings including the barracks, and a vast storehouse in which supplies were stored in great quantities. Some of the buildings were of sod or adobe but the officers' quarters, the barracks, and the warehouse were of rough lumber, brought from the east. Fort Kearny was an important station on the Overland Stage Route. It was the western terminal of the first division of the line from Atchison, Kansas west to the coast. A short distance west of the Fort were the eating house, the office, the storehouses and stables of the stage company. About two miles west of the Fort was Dobytown, with a population of about three hundred people. Dobytown was a gathering place for outlaws and gamblers who secured their living off the many travelers who passed through the town. Just east of the military reservation was situated Valley City or Dog Town.<sup>4</sup>

Between Omaha and Fort Kearny, on the Western Stage Company's Route and the transcontinental telegraph, were the small settlements which later became the towns of

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<sup>2</sup>A. T. Andreas, *History of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1882), p. 611; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XLI, Part II, 30; Eugene F. Ware, *Indian War of 1864* (Topeka, 1911), p. 9; Albert Watkins, "History of Fort Kearny," *Collections*, Nebraska State Historical Society, XVI, 241.

<sup>3</sup>Watkins, *loc. cit.* This post was first designated as Fort Childs, after Captain Childs who commanded the post in the early part of 1848. By an order of the War Department dated December 30, 1848 it received the name of Fort Kearny.

<sup>4</sup>F. A. Root and W. L. Connelley, *Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, 1901), p. 293; Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 43; David Anderson, "Early Settlements Along the Platte Valley," *Collections*, Nebraska State Historical Society, XVI, 194.

Fremont, Columbus, and Grand Island. In the latter part of the fifties many settlers had come into this part of the country.<sup>5</sup>

Settlements were attempted along the Little Blue Valley as early as 1858. By 1864 there had been established ranches and stage stations along the Oregon Trail from the place it entered the state to Fort Kearny where it joined the Platte River road. Some of the ranches and stations along this road, suffered from the Indian raids of 1864. Such attacks were made on the Big Sandy station, Little Blue station, Liberty Farm, Eubank's Ranch and Comstock's Ranch.<sup>6</sup>

West from Fort Kearny out on the Platte River road there were stage stations and ranches about every ten miles. Many of these ranchers contracted with the Government to furnish hay and beef to the army post. Plum Creek station, thirty-five miles west, was in the heart of the buffalo country. Here there was located a telegraph office. Further on, one hundred miles west of Fort Kearny, was Cottonwood Springs, a favorite camping point for freighters and emigrants because they could obtain supplies from the McDonald Ranch. In 1863 Fort McPherson was built at Cottonwood Springs. It later became a supply depot for the army during the campaign in the Powder River country. Twelve miles west was Jack Morrow's Ranch. This ranch was christened "Junction House" because it was located near the junction of the north and south forks of the Platte River. Morrow was a pioneer on the plains. He had a large house of cedar logs and a very creditable store from which he supplied freighters and travelers with such articles as they chanced to need. He was friendly with the Indians, and did much trading with the tribes along the Platte. Each year he made a trip to Omaha to dispose of great quantities of furs and robes which he

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<sup>5</sup>Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 915-205; Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 20; John G. Ellenbecker, *Indian Raids of 1860-1869* (Marysville, Kansas, 1927). Ware states that between Omaha and Columbus one-fourth of the quarter-sections of land in the valley had occupants.

<sup>6</sup>Ellenbecker, *op. cit.*

had procured from the Indians.<sup>7</sup> Two hundred miles west of Fort Kearny was Julesburg, just across the line in Colorado Territory. At this period Julesburg was a small settlement. There were not more than a dozen buildings in the entire town. There was a station built of cedar logs, a telegraph office, blacksmith's shop, stables, corrals, a billiard saloon, a large store, and a warehouse filled with the stage company's supplies. Julesburg was important as a staging and freighting junction. One stage line crossed the South Platte, followed the river to Junction, thence southwest to Denver, the other ran up the Pole Creek and the Ridge Road to the North Platte and up that stream by way of Fort Laramie and on into the mountains.<sup>8</sup>

The Indians which inhabited Nebraska were grouped in nine tribes, speaking six different languages. They were the Sioux, the Missouri, the Pawnees, the Poncas, the Omahas, the Otoes, the Arapahoes, the Cheyennes, and, as late-comers, the Winnebagoes. The Sioux tribes occupied the northwest part of Nebraska. These tribes were the Oglala and the Brule Sioux. The Poncas and the Omahas spoke the same language. These tribes came to Nebraska from the north, at the same time. The Poncas settled in the territory about the mouth, and north of the Niobrara River; while the Omahas occupied the northeast section of the state. The Pawnees were divided into two clans; the Grand Pawnee Clan lived in central Nebraska in villages scattered along the Loup River and its forks. The Republican Pawnee Clan occupied territory extending from south of the Platte to the Republican River. The lands held by the Kansas, the Missouri and the Otoes were in southeastern Nebraska. The Arapahoes and the Southern Cheyennes jointly held the southwestern section of the state and the high plains of eastern Colorado and western Kan-

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<sup>7</sup>Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, pp. 199-218; George B. Grinnell, *The Fighting Cheyennes* (New York, 1915), p. 176. This was the old Overland Stage Road, abandoned in 1862 because of Indian troubles. After that it was used by emigrants and the military only. The overland telegraph ran along this route.

sas.<sup>9</sup> The Arapahoes and the Cheyennes were in close alliance and enjoyed inter-tribal relations. Many Cheyenne men married Arapahoe women, but comparatively few Cheyenne women married Arapahoe men. There is no tradition that the Cheyennes and the Sioux ever had any serious trouble among themselves. But many battles were fought between the Pawnees and the allied Arapahoes and Cheyennes over the possession of southwestern Nebraska; also the Sioux warred continually with the Pawnees.<sup>10</sup> The Omahas, Otoes, Missouri, Pawnees and Poncas may be designated as the domestic tribes of Nebraska. They had a definite habitat within the state. The other tribes were of a roving nature.<sup>11</sup>

During the early sixties the central plains region was ill prepared to ward off Indian attacks. During this period almost all the troops had been withdrawn from the frontier to fight the Confederates.<sup>12</sup> At Ford Larned, on the Arkansas River, there were left but thirty-nine men. At Fort Wise, on the Arkansas, there were stationed thirty-three men. On the Platte, at Fort Kearny, there were one hundred twenty-five troops. At Fort Laramie there were only ninety men. Thus scattered over this Indian country there were less than three hundred men at the four posts.<sup>13</sup>

During this period, Nebraska Territory was under the military jurisdiction of the Department of Kansas, with Major General Samuel R. Curtis in command. The headquarters for this Department was at Leavenworth, Kansas. The Department of Kansas was divided into the districts of Colorado, North Kansas, the Upper Arkansas, South Kansas, and Nebraska. The District of Nebraska extended

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<sup>9</sup>John F. Cordeal, "Historical Sketch of Southwestern Nebraska," *Collections*, Nebraska State Historical Society, XVII, 20; Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-61; Albert Watkins, *Outline of Nebraska History* (Lincoln, 1910), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup>Grinnell, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup>Watkins, *op. cit.*, p. 27. For a history of these Indian tribes see *Bureau of American Ethnology*, Bulletin 30.

<sup>12</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXVII, Part II, 702.

<sup>13</sup>Grinnell, *op. cit.*, p. 124. It would seem that if the Indians had desired war, they would have attacked at this time, for at all times they knew the military strength of the various garrisons.

west into Colorado Territory and what was then Idaho Territory. Omaha was district headquarters with Brigadier General Robert B. Mitchell in command. From Omaha west to and including Julesburg, Colorado Territory, was the Eastern Sub-district with headquarters at Fort Kearny. The Western Sub-district began west of Julesburg and extended along the route to South Pass. Headquarters for this Sub-district was at Fort Laramie.<sup>14</sup>

The first Nebraska Regiment, organized in the summer of 1861, was in the South. The Second Regiment was sent north and attached to General Sully's command, during his campaign against the Sioux in Dakota. During the summer of 1863, one company of this regiment was stationed at the Pawnee Agency.<sup>15</sup> In the summer of 1863, in response to the call of the settlers for protection, the Government ordered the Seventh Iowa Cavalry to the West. Eight companies were sent to Nebraska Territory. The other four companies of the regiment had been sent northward and were stationed at Sioux City, Iowa.<sup>16</sup> Companies C and F, under the command of Major George O'Brien, constructed a new post at Cottonwood Springs. This post was named Fort Cottonwood and later changed to Fort McPherson. It became one of the most important posts on the frontier. In April, 1864, several companies of the Eleventh Ohio Cavalry were ordered west to Fort Laramie to be distributed along the Oregon Trail to prevent Indian uprisings.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Ware, *op. cit.*, pp. 25,427; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XLI, Part IV, 989.

<sup>15</sup>Pawnee Agency was located about twenty miles from Columbus, in the eastern part of what is now Nance County, near the present town of Genoa.

<sup>16</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part IV, 621, 620, 628; *Ibid.*, XLI, Part II, 30; Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 8. On July 30, 1864, Company A was at Dakota City, C and F at Fort McPherson, B and D at Fort Kearny, E at the Pawnee Agency, Nebraska Territory, G at Topeka, H at Fort Riley, I at Sioux City, Iowa., and K, L, and M with General Sully's command in Dakota.

<sup>17</sup>Ware, *op. cit.*, p. 165. The Eleventh Ohio Cavalry was partly composed of rebel prisoners who had taken the oath of allegiance and enlisted in the United States service, with the understanding that they were to be used on the frontier to fight Indians. They were known in the Union Army as "white washed rebs," or as they called themselves "galvanized yanks,"—Watkins, "History of Fort Kearny," *Collections*, Nebraska State Historical Society, XVI, 250.

This constituted the military protection in Nebraska Territory at the time of the outbreak, which occurred in August, 1864. This military defense was entirely inadequate to afford protection for the settlers against the immense number of Indians who swarmed down upon the Platte and Little Blue Valleys, plundering mail stages and emigrant trains, murdering emigrants and settlers, stealing stock and destroying ranches, and threatening general destruction to the whole frontier.

Notwithstanding the various reports that the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapahoes had, in 1863, made an agreement to war on the whites, the Indians in the early part of 1864 were considered friendly. On March 24, General Mitchell, commander of the District of Nebraska, in a message to the Assistant Adjutant General at Fort Leavenworth, stated that he had had an interview with John Hunter, a white man, who lived with the Sioux. Hunter stated that the Sioux and other tribes of the upper Platte were friendly. The only cause of dissatisfaction among the tribes was from a dislike of the agent in charge of Indian affairs in that country. Captain Ware in his book, *The Indian War of 1864*, does not mention any trouble with the Indians along the Platte during the spring of 1864. On March 12, Major Colley, Indian Agent in the Upper Arkansas district, reported that the Indians were all quiet along the Arkansas and Platte Rivers.<sup>18</sup>

In April, June, and July, General Mitchell held three councils with the Sioux on the Platte River, but each ended in failure.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part II, 720, 633. Mr. T. T. Young, Lincoln, Nebraska, went over the Platte River Road to Colorado in 1864. He stated that during the summer of that year the Indians appeared very friendly.

<sup>19</sup>The councils were held at Cottonwood Springs on April 17, June 8, and July 19, with the Brule and the Ogallala Sioux. The councils were held for the purpose of securing a promise from the Sioux that they would keep away from the Platte River Road. The first and second meetings broke up with the understanding that they would meet again and try to reach an agreement. At the third meeting, on July 19, General Mitchell brought with him a company of Pawnee Indian Scouts. He brought them and the Sioux together and attempted to make peace between them. General Mitchell made



During this time the Cheyennes and Arapahoes had several engagements with detachments of Colorado troops which undoubtedly hastened the general Indian outbreak that took place the following August. On April 9, Colonel Chivington, commander of the District of Colorado, reported the theft of one hundred seventy-five head of cattle to the Adjutant General of the Department of Kansas. The report stated that the cattle had been stolen by a band of Cheyennes from the Government contractors, Irwin, Jackman and Company, on the headwaters of the Big Sandy on the Smoky Hill Route of the Overland Stage Line.<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant Eayre, with a detachment of troops, was sent out to recover the stock. He found a Cheyenne camp of five lodges in the vicinity of the source of the Republican River. The Indians saw the troops approaching and fled. He followed them a short distance; then returned and burned the village. A few days later he found another camp with great quantities of stores, which he destroyed. Lieutenant Eayre recovered nineteen head of cattle from the Indians.<sup>21</sup>

On April 12, a party of Southern Cheyennes who were traveling north to join the Northern Cheyennes in a war against the Crows, was attacked by Lieutenant Dunn and a detachment of the First Colorado Cavalry. The Indians, before they had reached the South Platte, had found four stray mules which they took along with them. In the

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a peace talk and several of the chiefs responded but no agreement was reached. The Sioux and the Pawnee Chiefs kept denouncing and insulting each other until General Mitchell became disgusted and ordered the Sioux to leave and not come back again. They left, being very angry, and did not come back again. —Ware, *op. cit.*, pp. 146, 198, 219.

<sup>20</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXIV, Part III, 113. This report came from the herders in charge of the stock. It seems likely that the cattle might have stampeded or strayed away from camp. Kit Carson, in his testimony before the Joint Special Committee, declared that herders often hired men without responsibility to tend their stock, and when through their negligence the stock strayed away, to escape the blame themselves, they often accused the Indians of having stolen it. —Report of Joint Special Committee, *Senate Reports*, 39th Congress, second session.

<sup>21</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part III, 218.

evening a white man came into their camp and demanded the mules. The Indians refused to give them up unless they were given a present to pay for their trouble. The man departed to a camp of soldiers and told the officer that a camp of hostile Indians had driven away his stock. Captain Sanburn sent Lieutenant Dunn to recover the stock. Dunn overtook the Indians on the north side of the South Platte River near Fremont's Orchard.<sup>22</sup> The fight lasted about an hour; the Indians were driven about twenty miles. At the commencement of the fight a small party of Indians drove the mules into the bluffs, and they were never recovered.<sup>23</sup>

Other collisions between the soldiers and the Indians followed. On July 17, Indian raids were made along the South Platte and seventeen horses were stolen from Bijou Ranch, which was eighty-five miles from Denver. Soldiers, sent from Fort Sanburn after the Indians, met a band of five Indians driving a herd of stock. The five Indians were killed and the stock recovered.<sup>24</sup> About this time Lieutenant Eayre, who had been ordered out again from Denver to look for hostile Indians, met a large band of Cheyennes moving north. In the skirmish that followed, Lean Bear, a Cheyenne chief, was killed. The Indians declared that Eayre began the attack. They claimed that Lean Bear and a few Indians rode out to meet the soldiers and when within a few feet of the troops the soldiers opened fire on them. In testimony before the Joint Special Committee, Asbury

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<sup>22</sup>Fremont's Orchard, so named by Fremont because he saw a grove of cottonwood trees on the south side of the Platte at this place. The grove had the appearance of an old apple orchard. It is east of Denver on the South Platte Road.

<sup>23</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part I, 149, 884, 887. According to the Indians' statement, the troops fired on them without any warning. On the other hand Lieutenant Dunn states in his report, that when the stock which the Indians were driving were recognized, by Ripley the owner, he (Dunn) requested that the chief return them. The Indians paid no attention to this. Lieutenant Dunn, who had gone forward to talk with the chief, then rode back to his command, the Indians following him, their bows strung with arrows. The soldiers were ordered to disarm the Indians. As soon as the men had dismounted the Indians charged. —Grinnell, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>24</sup>Leroy R. Hafen, *The Overland Mail* (Cleveland, 1926), p. 257.

Bird of Company D, First Colorado Cavalry, stated that they were attacked by the Cheyennes; but he also stated that Lieutenant Eayre made no effort whatever to hold council with the Indians.<sup>25</sup> On the day following this engagement the Cheyennes made a raid on the settlements along the stage road between Fort Riley and Fort Larned. At Walnut Ranch, fifteen miles below Fort Larned, the keeper was told to leave; and his wife, a Cheyenne squaw, was taken away from him. They informed him that they had been attacked by the soldiers and that they intended to kill all the whites they could find.<sup>26</sup>

This was the beginning of the War of 1864. The Indians could not understand the recent and frequent attacks of the soldiers. They became uneasy and angry with the whites. That trouble between the Indians and whites would soon break out was realized by the officers in this region. On June 20, 1864, Major H. D. Walen of the Seventh Infantry sent the following message to the Adjutant General:

"I have just crossed the plains and am sure from authentic information that an expensive Indian War is about to take place between the whites and the Cheyennes, Kiowas, and a band of Arapahoes. It can be prevented by prompt management."<sup>27</sup>

Major T. K. McKenny, Inspector General, who had been sent to investigate the recent troubles, reported in regard to the Indian difficulties:

"I think if great caution is not exercised on our part there will be a bloody war. It should be our policy

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<sup>25</sup>Report of Joint Special Committee, *Senate Reports*, 39th Congress, second session, p. 72; Grinnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-141.

<sup>26</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part IV, 149. Immediately after the commander at Fort Larned heard of this raid he called a council of the Arapahoes, Kiowas and Comanches. They claimed the Sioux were with the Cheyennes the day before when they fought Lieutenant Eayre's troops. They admitted they had been asked to join them against the whites. This appears as if the Indians had planned to attack the whites. George Bent, a half breed, claimed the Cheyennes had assembled together for the purpose of going north to hunt buffalo.

<sup>27</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part IV, 476.

to try and conciliate them . . . and stop these scouting parties that are roaming over the country that do not know one tribe from another, and who will kill anything in the shape of an Indian. It will require but few murders on the part of our troops to unite all these warlike tribes of the plains, who have been at peace for years."<sup>28</sup>

Any policy, that the Government might have adopted at that time, would have been too late. The tribes had already united and war parties were being formed among the Cheyennes, Arapahoes and Sioux which were soon to sweep down upon the Platte and Arkansas Valleys in a raid which the Indians believed would drive the settlers from the country.<sup>29</sup>

[To be continued]

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<sup>28</sup>*Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, XXXIV, Part IV, p. 402.

<sup>29</sup>Grinnell, *op. cit.*, p. 142.