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Article Summary: Stage coach service between Independence and Salt Lake City began in 1850 and overland freighting soon followed. All this westbound traffic used the Oregon Trail past Fort Kearny. After the Union Pacific Railroad reached the hundredth meridian in 1866, the old overland trail fell into disuse.

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Photographs / Images: soldiers escorting the overland mail west of Fort Kearny

# Stage Coach and Freightier Days at Fort Kearny

*By Lyle E. Mantor*

**I**N 1848 Fort Kearny on the Platte was an isolated place. Neither communication nor transportation had been regularly established and the soldiers at the post were almost cut off from the rest of the world. It was not until 1850 that any regular transportation or communication facilities were provided over the Oregon Trail and past Fort Kearny. The slow but constant emigration to Utah, and the admission of California into the Union in 1850, were factors which made more rapid transportation necessary.

Stage coach service was begun between Independence, Missouri, and Salt Lake City, Utah, in the summer of 1850. This service was made possible by the action of the government in awarding a contract for the carrying of the mail between these two points. The Oregon Trail past Fort Kearny was followed, thus giving the fort a mail and passenger service not a part of the military establishment. The service was monthly: a coach left Independence and Salt Lake City every four weeks, except in winter, carrying mail and passengers. In the winter the mail was carried by pack horses, no passenger service being provided. Two or three weeks were required to make the trip from Independence to Salt Lake City, 1,200 miles; but later, when stage stations and relays of live stock were established along the road, the trip was made in less time. At first there was no definite schedule, but after the stations were established, a schedule was maintained with some regularity. During the first years of stage service little use was made of it by the public. The

cost was borne largely by the compensation received for carrying the mail. Later, however, the stages became a popular means of overland travel and continued to hold that position until the first railroad to the Pacific coast was completed.<sup>1</sup>

Monthly stage service past the fort was continued until 1858 when a weekly service was inaugurated. To maintain its schedules the stage company had established stations every ten or twelve miles along the route. These were of two kinds, swing stations and home stations. The swing stations, ten or twelve miles apart, consisted of a stable, granary, and a room for one or two stock tenders. At these stations the horses were changed. The home stations, about fifty miles apart, were larger, for it was at these stations that the driver's route ended, and here passengers could secure meals. A home station was located at Fort Kearny about forty rods distant to the west from the fort. There was an office, storehouse, barn, stable, and an eating house, most of which were built of cedar logs, and plainly constructed. The logs had been hauled more than a hundred miles by team, and the buildings were substantial and well answered the purposes for which they were used.<sup>2</sup>

The eating house at Fort Kearny was one of the best along the line. Writers probably mentioned the fact because the meals served at most of the stations were not very good. Mark Twain, who was a passenger overland in 1861, compared the bread served at the stage stations to Nicholson pavement, and related that the bacon was condemned Army bacon which the United States would not feed to its soldiers in the forts, and which the stage company had bought at a low price.<sup>3</sup> William Fulton, who was at Fort Kearny in 1863, writes, "At \$1 each, meals consisting of bacon, bread, and coffee, with sometimes

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<sup>1</sup>Seymour Dunbar, *A History of Travel in America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1915), pp. 1318-1319.

<sup>2</sup>Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, 1901), p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>Samuel L. Clemens, *Roughing It* (Chicago, 1872), pp. 43-44.

game." could be obtained, but that butter and eggs were unknown luxuries.<sup>4</sup> Frank Root mentions that he "seldom ate a meal between Fort Kearney and old Julesburg, in staging days, that was not made up in part of choice, juicy steaks of superb roasts cut from the 'wild crooked-back' oxen . . . which were substituted for bacon and dry sides, while crossing the plains in those days."<sup>5</sup>

Fort Kearny was a busy place during the rushing days of overland staging. The heavy Concord coaches, drawn by their four or six horse teams, and carrying passengers and the overland mail, rolled in daily from Atchison, Omaha, Nebraska City, and California. Usually about the station could be found a busy throng composed of stage men, passengers, freighters, drivers, soldiers, and a promiscuous crowd generally.

At this point the stages of the Western Stage Company connected with the Holladay lines. The "Western" operated stages in Iowa and from Nebraska City and Omaha to Fort Kearny by way of the road on the north bank of the Platte. There was a considerable rivalry between these companies, and often in time of heavy travel, passengers from the Western line were forced to wait days at Fort Kearny for a seat in the westbound stage, because the through passengers from Atchison were always given preference by the Holladay line over those from the Western Stage Company's line. This caused much grumbling on the part of passengers and was not overcome until the Western line was taken over by Holladay in the sixties, when better accommodations were provided for the Omaha passengers.<sup>6</sup>

A stage company agent was always on duty at the Fort Kearny station. Being at the junction of the two lines it was necessary to maintain an agent at this point.

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<sup>4</sup>William Fulton, "Freighting and Staging in Early Days," Nebraska State Historical Society, *Proceedings and Collections*, V, 363.

<sup>5</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

<sup>6</sup>J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Jacob North and Company, 1907), I, 96.

He attended to the passenger business and looked after the way pouch of mail which he opened daily at the fort. The agents who served at Fort Kearny were successively a Mr. Creighton, W. A. Gillispie, George M. Lloyd, and Ed C. Hughes.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the heat of summer or the cold blasts of winter, the stages usually went through on time. To the conductors and drivers there was a fascination in seeing the familiar landmarks in their run. One conductor writes, "No place on the eastern division of the overland route was of more interesting history than Fort Kearney. When riding on the stage, it mattered not whether going east or west—I was always glad when the old coach had approached near enough to the fort so that I could get a sight of the flag floating above the garrison." On the west bound trip he knew that a third of the distance from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains had been covered and that, upon leaving the fort, they would be fairly out upon the plains. On the east bound trip Fort Kearny meant that two-thirds of the trip between Denver and Atchison had been accomplished. It was here also that the first sod buildings west of Atchison were seen, they having been erected in pioneer overland freighting, pony express, and staging days. "The post office, built of sod—also used as the first telegraph office at the fort—although small, was in the early sixties one of the most prominent of the few buildings of that character between the Missouri River and the Rockies."<sup>8</sup>

Until the summer of 1864 the stage line encountered little difficulty with the Indians. In August of that year Indian troubles broke out and very seriously interfered with the operation of the stages. These depredations, the worst experienced on the line, were largely confined to the Platte Valley. The attacks were made by Cheyennes, Sioux, Kiowas and Arapahoes, and extended for 400 miles, east and west of Fort Kearny. They began on the Little

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<sup>7</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65.

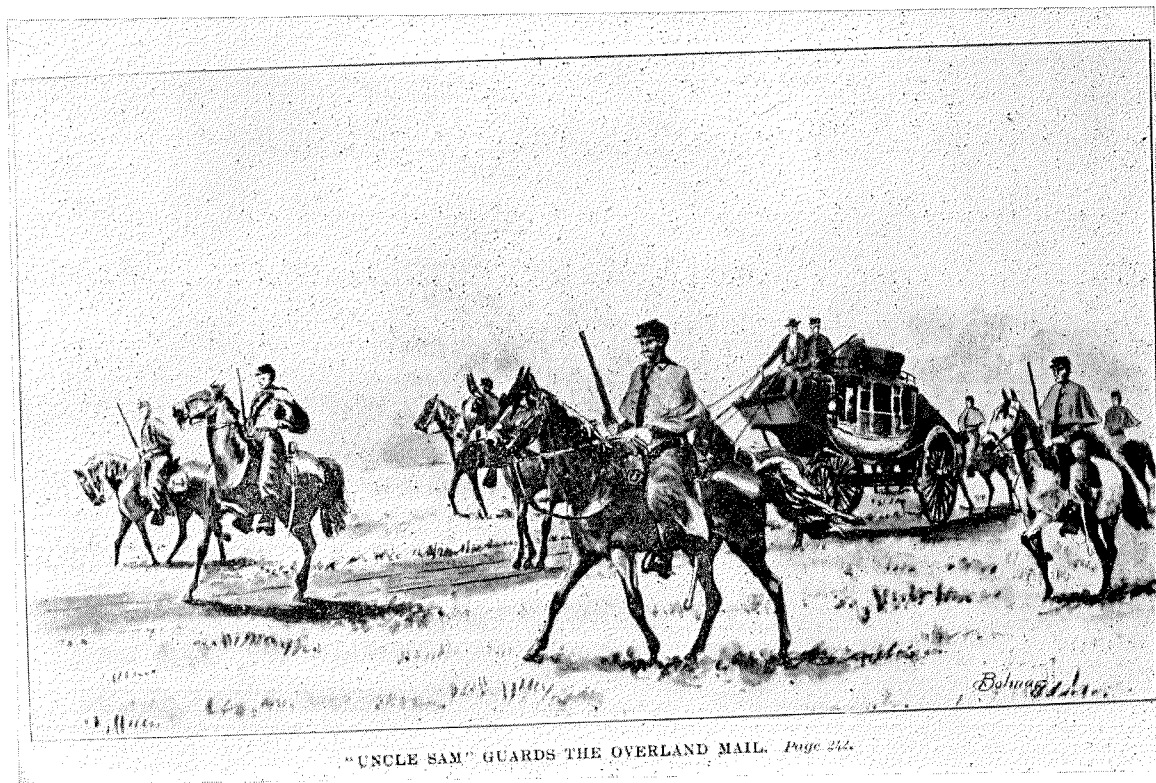
Blue River, 100 miles southeast of the fort and spread along the Platte valley, westward to Junction, on the South Platte River, to within eighty-five miles of Denver.

In these depredations along the Platte not only were scores of people butchered but property valued into the thousands of dollars was destroyed. It is estimated that the loss of cattle, mules and other property stolen or destroyed in these raids amounted to nearly one million dollars.

Every stage station in the eastern division of the line between Big Sandy and Thirty-two Mile Creek, except the one at Fort Kearny, was burned and the stock run off. The garrison at the fort was powerless to check these raids, which were well planned and daringly executed by the savages, over a radius of more than 200 miles. The Indians did not dare to attack the station at Fort Kearny, which was but forty rods from the quarters of some four hundred soldiers, but were able successfully to swoop down upon all of the others along the line.

The stage company, in justice to the large number of its employees, as well as for the safety of the stock and other property, was obliged to abandon fully 500 miles of line, leaving its hay, grain, provisions, household furnishings, etc., to the tender mercy of the savages. Almost every ranch house within 150 miles east or west of Fort Kearny was deserted, the owners having been forced to flee with their families to the forts along the way. Many took refuge at Fort Kearny, while others fled to the forts nearer their homes. Even the oldest Indian traders, most accustomed to the ways of the Indians, were forced to flee.

Commerce on the plains came to a standstill. The overland mail, which had been running on a daily schedule regularly for more than three years, stopped. The flow of emigrants across the plains ceased entirely and hundreds of wagons loaded with all kinds of freight were forced to corral at the most convenient point and remain motionless for weeks. Business of every nature along the "overland" was completely tied up. To the west of Fort



From Root and Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California.*

ESCORTING THE OVERLAND MAIL, WEST OF FORT KEARNY

Kearny there was no traffic on the road, no pilgrims were coming or going, and the Indian scare was all-prevailing. Troops were sent out from Fort Kearny by Colonel William Baumer, the commanding officer, to guard the trail from further attack. Additional posts were temporarily established at Junction Station, forty miles east of the fort, and at Millallas Station, fifty miles west. Troops were sent from Fort Kearny to garrison each of these stations.<sup>9</sup> In all, stage and other traffic was tied up for a period of six weeks.

Stage traffic past Fort Kearny was re-established and continued, somewhat irregularly, for about three months. A fresh Indian attack, however, broke out about the twentieth of the following January, when the Cheyenne and Sioux Indians made another raid along the Platte, and took complete charge of the stage route for several hundred miles. Holladay's stage property suffered greatly, the redskins burned a large number of the partially rebuilt stations, stole and burned all hay and grain in sight and ran off all of the horses. They also played havoc with the few freighters who happened to be on the road during that time of the year.

Again commerce over the Oregon Trail was paralyzed, and no west bound stage coaches were able to leave Atchison for several weeks. A large amount of mail accumulated for Forts Kearny, Cottonwood and Laramie and for Denver, with no way of moving it. After careful deliberation the stage authorities decided, about February 1, to try to get a stage through. The regular conductor, whose turn it was, refused to go, so Frank Root was chosen to undertake the hazardous trip. He started out from Atchison, February 7, with a coach loaded with more than a ton of accumulated mail. He was armed with a brace of revolvers and a breach loading rifle, and trusted to Providence to get through.

From Atchison to Fort Kearny all went well. The overland road was good, and as there was little Indian

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<sup>9</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, September, 1864.



excitement on that end of the division good time was made. At the fort all was excitement and around the military headquarters and stage station the wildest rumors of Indian depredations west were afloat. In view of these rumors, the "Overland" officers decided that it would not be best to send the stage on at night. The division agent ordered the stage to remain at Fort Kearny over night, since most of the run of 100 miles to Cottonwood Springs could be made in daylight.

"For fourteen hours," writes Root, "we tarried at the fort, much of the time discussing the rumors of Indian raids. Getting an early start before daylight the next morning, which was the tenth of February, 1865, with the stage stock in splendid condition, we started off at a lively gait up the Platte. Cottonwood Springs was reached a little after nine o'clock at night, after a ride of about sixteen hours. Much of the road during the day was in poor condition; still we made over six miles an hour, including all stops. For seventy-five miles of the distance, the road, which formerly was fairly swarming with white-covered prairie-schooners as far as the eye could reach, now seemed to be as barren as a desert. Not a moving vehicle except the stage was to be seen for nearly the entire distance. All the ranches were deserted, the owners with their families having hurriedly fled for their lives. Compared with former trips, along this part of the Platte, the journey was a very disagreeable and lonesome one."<sup>10</sup>

Along the road were still horrible reminders of Indian atrocity. Fresh graves were numerous, and at Cottonwood Springs excitement ran high. Fresh rumors came in from all sides and it was a matter of conjecture as to how long the stage would have to remain there. The Indians still held undisputed possession of about 150 miles of the line and no stage or freighting outfits had gone over the route for several weeks.

Resumption of stage traffic was further delayed by the fact that, when traffic was resumed, each stage would

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<sup>10</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, p. 373.

have to be hauled at least 200 miles by a team of four or six horses without change of stock. In addition to the regular load of passengers and mail, every pound of hay and grain which the animals would consume would have to be hauled also. Under such conditions but thirty five to sixty miles would be the maximum day's distance which could possibly be expected. It would take several weeks, at the least, to establish stations on the route again and stock them with animals, hay and grain.

While Root was at Cottonwood Springs the following order from the commanding officer at Fort Leavenworth passed over the wire: "Headquarters, Department of Missouri, Fort Leavenworth, February 11, 1865. Brigadier General Mitchell, Omaha: I have just informed the Overland Mail Company that I am prepared to protect their mail through this department. See that the proper protection is given it from Fort Kearney west to insure its safety. (Signed) Grenville M. Dodge, Major General."<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, the receipt of this news was highly gratifying to the officials and employees of the stage line. It also was received with satisfaction by the owners of the wagon trains tied up all along the Platte, and they got ready to move at once. The stage company at once began to restock its line from Fort Kearny up the Platte to Bijou Creek, a distance of some three hundred miles.

Root stayed at Cottonwood Springs six days, leaving on February 16, with three Concord coaches and a vast amount of mail for Colorado, Utah and Montana, besides the accumulated letter mail for the Pacific coast. He reached Julesburg at 11 A.M., Sunday, February 19, in a driving blizzard, and arrived in Denver two days later, without incident. He remained there until March 2, when he left for Atchison on a Concord coach, with seven passengers and a large load of mail. He arrived at Fort Kearny at 9:30 A.M., March 7, and got to Atchison on March 10, having been gone since February 7.

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<sup>11</sup>*Idem.*

When traffic was regularly resumed it was found necessary to station soldiers at frequent intervals along the south side of the Platte River. Details for this purpose were sent from Fort Kearny and the posts west. Each stage, pursuant to General Dodge's order, was attended by a guard of mounted soldiers from Fort Kearny. To better protect themselves against possible Indian attack, emigrant and freight outfits were required to be formed into large trains by uniting the individual outfits, before being permitted to go west of the fort. The men in the trains were organized and drilled, so that every man knew his duty in case of attack. The officers at the fort also saw to it that the trains were provided with suitable arms and ammunition, so that should the occasion require, they could resist a considerable body of Indians.

After the Indian scare it was difficult to secure stage drivers, even though the highest wages were offered. This was especially true during the summer of 1865. William F. Cody, better known now as "Buffalo Bill", had been a rider on the old Pony Express, and being without a job, applied for work as a stage driver. His courage and integrity were well known so he was employed at once. Writers rate him as not only one of the best Pony Express riders, but also as a good overland stage driver. Cody drove a handsome gray team, a favorite with the drivers, and his run was usually from Fort Kearny to Plum Creek, thirty five miles distant. His expert knowledge of the whole route from Fort Kearny to Salt Lake City, however, made it possible to use him anywhere along that division of the line.

Even by the latter part of May conditions were not yet normal on the plains. Samuel Bowles started from Atchison on May 21 and was impressed by the high price which the grain for its horses cost the Overland Stage and Mail Company on account of the havoc made by the Indians the preceding season. He and his party were alarmed by the lateness of the last stage from the west before their departure, it being eighteen hours late. It had been attacked by Indians about half way between Fort Kearny and Atchison.

It is the first raid of the redskins this season, and so thorough precautions had been made by General Connor, who had charge of the troops along that route, that it was believed there would be no trouble, the stages had assumed their old certainty and regularity, came in here every day within half an hour of the scheduled time, and left precisely at eight every morning and timed their arrivals at the stations along the route so certainly that the keepers had the meals all cooked and warm as the stages drove up, all the way from here to Salt Lake City. But today's news shows that some of the Indians had broken through or run around the military lines. They commenced by ambushing a party of some twelve to twenty soldiers, mostly converted rebels, on their way up from Leavenworth to Fort Kearney, but without arms. Two of these they killed outright, and most of the rest they wounded so savagely that they will probably die. The next day they assaulted the incoming stage, which had some six or eight passengers, men, women and children, circling around and around the vehicle on well-mounted horses, and shooting their arrows fast and sharp—only one had a musket, and another a pistol—at horses and passengers. The horses were whipped up, the men on the coach had two rifles and kept them in play, and thus the Indians were held at bay until the protection of a station and a train was secured, when the attacking party, finding themselves baffled, retired. They numbered about twenty-five in all, and their appearance on what was supposed to be the safest part of the route, and the one least protected by soldiers, has made some excitement.<sup>12</sup>

The Indian danger was not entirely removed until after the era of the stage coach had passed, although during the last years, when the stages connected with the railroad, traveling was comparatively safe.

Stage coach days were numbered before they began, but during its day the stage coach rendered great and never-to-be-forgotten service. So far as Fort Kearny was concerned staging days were over after 1866, for on October 5 of that year the Pacific railroad was completed to the one hundredth parallel, fifty miles west of Fort Kearny.

Overland freighting from the Missouri River towns followed the same route past Fort Kearny as did the stage lines and the emigrants. The era of freighting may be said to have begun with the contracts let by the government for supplying the Utah expedition of 1857, although

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<sup>12</sup>Samuel Bowles, *Across the Continent* (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1865), pp. 6-7.

some freighting had been done prior to that time. The firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, had numerous contracts for the hauling of supplies to the army of 5,000 men commanded by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston. This firm hauled over 16,000,000 pounds of supplies from Nebraska City, Nebraska, and from Leavenworth, Kansas, to Utah in the year 1858, and required over 3,500 wagons and 20,000 oxen to haul them. In March of that year they contracted to furnish the Utah army with 3,500 head of beef cattle from the ox trains, in fat and healthy condition, at \$7.50 per hundred, over a period of fifteen months.<sup>13</sup>

By the early sixties Fort Kearny had become an important station on the freighting and stage routes. "In the rushing days of overland freighting and staging it always appeared to be a lively spot around Fort Kearny. All the vast traffic of the plains by the Platte Valley route went across the military reservation and within a short distance of the old government post. Hundreds of white-covered 'prairie schooners' were daily seen on the great highway. Long trains, heavily loaded with every description of freight, and hauled by oxen, mules, and horses, could be seen going west or east at almost any hour of the day."<sup>14</sup>

The roads from Plattsmouth and Nebraska City joined about thirty miles from the Missouri River. The road from this junction to Fort Kearny was the best of all the eastern branches of the Platte route for freighting purposes. There was but one stream of any importance to cross, Salt Creek, and that had a rock bottom easy to ford. There was an abundance of grass, wood, and water all the way to the fort. The road was hard, dry and nearly level for the greater part of the way. It followed the Platte Valley for the last one hundred miles. From Nebraska City the distance to Fort Kearny was 200 miles, and from Plattsmouth, 185. The only difficulty experienced

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<sup>13</sup>Senate Executive Documents, 35th Congress, First Session, Volume 12, Number 46, Serial 929, pp. 2-4.

<sup>14</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, p. 240.

by freighters on this route was the uncertainty of Missouri River navigation from St. Joseph north. Hence many of the outfits started from the Missouri city rather than from Plattsmouth or Nebraska City.

The road from Omaha to Fort Kearny was first opened by the Mormon emigration, and followed the north bank of the river. It had many natural advantages, was a broad trail, with but gentle rise (about eight feet to the mile), and no difficult streams to ford. It passed over an undulating prairie country which was well wooded and watered. The northerly location of Omaha, however, hundreds of miles from the terminus of any railroad, prevented this route from being very extensively used by regular freighters, although it was the shortest route to Fort Kearny, being about 180 miles distant. Although not extensively used by freighters it was much traveled by emigrants to Pike's Peak and to California and was used exclusively by the annual Mormon expeditions, which started from Florence, some three miles to the north of Omaha.

The old Mormon trail extended up the north bank of the Platte, but there was a crossing opposite Fort Kearny connecting with the routes south of the river. The Mormons usually kept to the north bank, wishing to avoid coming in contact with the "Gentile" emigrants, most of whom followed the trail to the south of the river.

From Fort Kearny the carrying trade to the gold regions followed the great military road to Fort Laramie and from thence along the Sweetwater River and through the South Pass. Of it a writer in 1860 said, "a better natural road does not exist anywhere in the United States."<sup>15</sup>

Accurate statistics on plains freighting are difficult to secure. The enterprises were private and such books as were kept were seldom preserved. The risks involved in the business were so great, even though the chance for profit was sometimes good, that nearly every freighting

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<sup>15</sup>*Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, XLIV (January 1861), 34-35.  
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firm, sooner or later, went into bankruptcy. When this occurred it was unlikely that any books or papers of importance would be saved.

*Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* for January, 1861, gives some interesting figures for the carrying trade of 1860. According to these statistics 36,074,149 pounds of freight were transported during that year. A total of 16,439,134 pounds were hauled out of Kansas City, most of this probably going over the Santa Fe trail, although a part may have followed the old Oregon Trail route. To carry this tonnage originating at Kansas City required 7,000 horses and mules, 28,000 oxen, more than 3,000 wagons, and the employment of over 7,000 men.

Freight passing over the Platte route and past Fort Kearny started from Atchison and Leavenworth, Kansas Territory, St. Joseph, Missouri, and Nebraska City and Omaha, Nebraska Territory. From Atchison, 6,007,943 pounds were sent; from Leavenworth, 5,656,082 pounds; from St. Joseph, 1,672,000; from Nebraska City, 5,496,000; and from Omaha, 713,000; making a total of 20,000,000 pounds for the season. To handle this enormous tonnage over the Platte route required 40,000 oxen, 4,000 wagons, and more than 4,500 men.

The same statistics estimate that the total capital invested was \$5,545,900, the value of the oxen alone, at thirty-five dollars a head, being \$1,378,500. The average wagon cost one hundred fifty dollars, this item running well over a million dollars. Only the allurements of large profits could attract such huge amounts of capital, and had it not been for the depredations of the Indians, freighting firms would have shown good profits. With good luck one trip often paid for the capital outlay of the train. The Indians, however, could not be classified as "good luck."

Wagon freighting across the plains increased each year during the decade following 1858, and probably was at its height from 1863 to 1866. During that period Russell, Majors and Waddell had 6,250 wagons and 75,000 oxen

on the road.<sup>16</sup> According to a census taken for the year 1865, there were employed in the movement of goods, grain, and other stores westward from Nebraska City alone, 7,365 wagons, 7,231 mules, 50,712 oxen and 8,385 men. The amount of freight leaving this one point was 31,445,428 pounds. Frank A. Root describes the freight movement of that year past Fort Kearny:

The traffic on the plains over the old military highway had grown to be immense long before the country through which it passed was settled, except in a few localities. As many as five hundred heavily loaded wagons a day have often been counted as they passed the fort, many of them with supplies for Forts Laramie and Bridger, besides great numbers destined for merchants in the Mormon capital. In six weeks during the spring of 1865 a count was kept, showing that no less than 6,000 wagons, each loaded with from one to four tons of freight, had passed the Government post, bound west. Nine hundred of them passed in the last three days of the count.<sup>17</sup>

Until Fort Kearny was reached, the freighters were out of touch with the rest of the world. The telegraph line did not follow the route which they took, but instead, went up the river from St. Joseph, through Brownville, to Omaha. From there it followed the north bank of the Platte River to a point opposite Fort Kearny, where it crossed the river to the fort. Here the freighters again could have the advantage of communication. This proved very helpful to them for, with the aid of the telegraph, they could keep posted on the prices of grain, produce, and provisions, at all of the leading eastern markets. One Atchison firm, with a large quantity of whiskey en route across the plains during the Civil War, made about \$50,000 additional on its shipment by adding a special tax which Congress had imposed after its liquors had left the Missouri River. The news of this tax reached the ox train by telegraph.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Charles F. Lummis, "Pioneer Transportation in America," *McClure's Magazine*, XXVI (November 1905), 84-85.

<sup>17</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 130.



Freighting outfits were not permitted to camp on the military reservation at Fort Kearny, owing to scarcity of grass. Many of them camped, therefore, at Dobytown, at the western edge of the reservation, and but two miles from the fort. Here they were protected by the fort and were able to make necessary repairs before going on. As a result quite an outfitting town grew up at Dobytown, which flourished until the freighters were supplanted by the railroad.

The building of the Union Pacific Railroad made past Fort Kearny in 1866 revolutionized freight transportation. The old overland trail fell into disuse and the fort was no longer a factor in staging or freighting.