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## Article Title: Fort Kearny and the Westward Movement

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Article Summary: The second Fort Kearny, located on the Platte at Grand Island, replaced an earlier fort of that name poorly sited on the Missouri. It served Forty-Niners, then provided protection and supplies to travelers on the Oregon Trail. By 1870 the need for a military post at the fort had passed.

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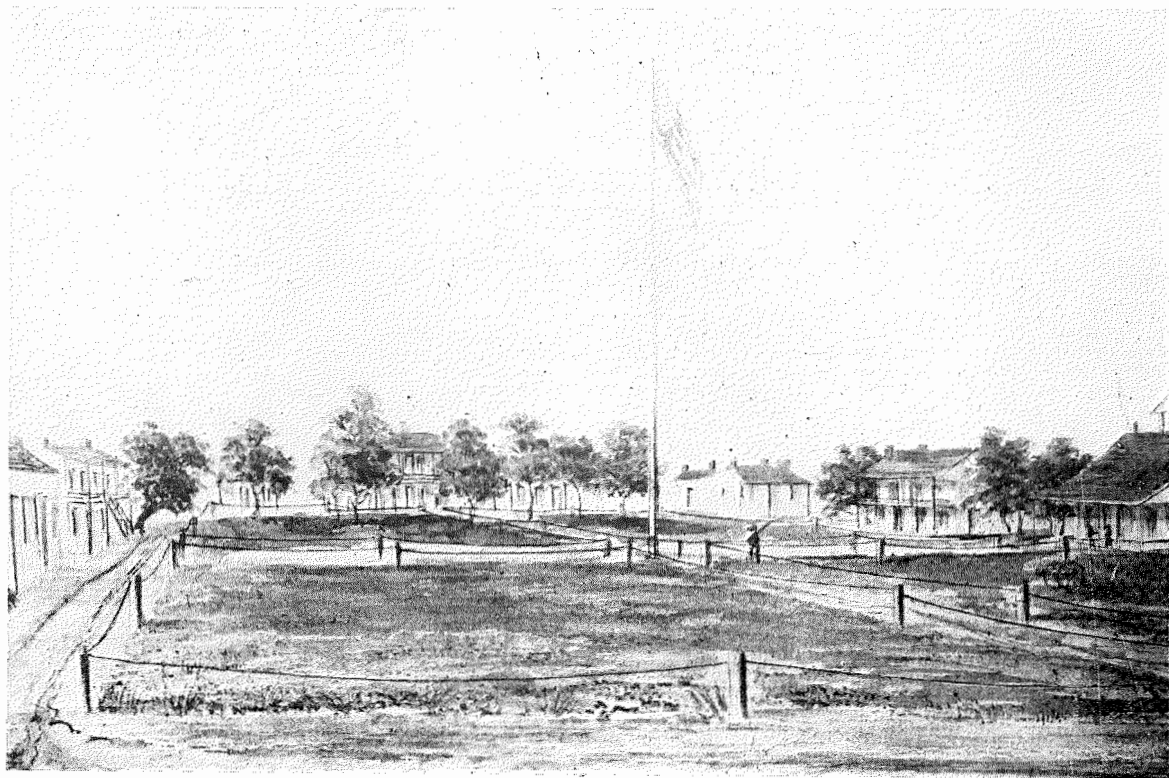
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Photographs / Images: sketch of Fort Kearny, 1864; a group of visitors examining relics from Fort Kearny



A SKETCH OF FORT KEARNY, 1864

# Fort Kearny and the Westward Movement

*By Lyle E. Mantor*

**A**T different times two military posts in what is now the State of Nebraska bore the name "Fort Kearny." The first was established in 1846 on the Missouri River, at the mouth of Table Creek, the present site of Nebraska City, in Otoe County. The second, the successor, was established in 1848, on the south bank of the Platte River, in Kearney County, eight miles south and east of the present city of Kearney, Nebraska. The second Fort Kearny was one hundred ninety miles west of the first and three hundred miles from Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Difficulty was experienced in the selection of the first site for the new post. It was finally located at the mouth of Table Creek, on the Missouri River. The outbreak of the Mexican War, at the time the fort was to be garrisoned, left no regular troops available for this duty. Volunteers from the State of Missouri were pressed into service and formed the first garrison.

The War Department soon realized that the Missouri River site was not properly chosen with regard to the route taken by western emigration. The Missouri River was not crossed so far north, but the larger part of the emigrants crossed at Westport, Leavenworth, or St. Joseph. Removal of the fort to the traveled highway was necessary.

Little remains of the former post to indicate its location. On the site once occupied by Old Fort Kearny on the Missouri stands Nebraska City, the seat of Otoe County, Nebraska.

An exploring party sent out in the fall of 1847 selected a more suitable site for the fort. After a thorough reconnaissance the engineer officer in charge, Lieutenant

Daniel P. Woodbury, recommended a place at the southernmost point of the Platte River, where the Oregon Trail touched that stream.<sup>1</sup> The fort was moved to the new location in the spring of 1848.

The land upon which the post was located originally belonged to the Pawnee Indians, and had been partially ceded to the United States in 1833. Steps were immediately taken by the Government to enter into a treaty to extinguish the Pawnee Indian title.

The Missouri Mounted Volunteers, moved from the Missouri to the Platte, were used in the work of constructing the buildings for the new post. The little timber available proved to be of poor quality for lumber. It was necessary to build some of the buildings from sod and adobe bricks, which were cut and dried by the soldiers. Unaccustomed to such work, they did not do well, and not much was accomplished. The close of the Mexican War, for which the volunteers had been enlisted, caused them to be withdrawn from Fort Kearny for discharge. They were relieved by a detachment of Mounted Rifles, upon whom fell the task of completing the buildings begun during the summer.

The new post had gone by the name "Fort Childs" but had never been so named officially. On December 30, 1848, Adjutant General R. Jones, in Section III, General Order No. 66, directed that, "The new post established at Grand Island, Platte River, will be known as Fort Kearny." Thus the post on the Platte, as well as the former post on the Missouri, were named "Fort Kearny", in honor of Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny, who died October 31, 1848, after a life of distinguished military service.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Woodbury to Totten, November 10, 1847 in Old Files Division, Adjutant General's Office, United States Army, Washington, D. C.

<sup>2</sup>Old Files Division, Adjutant General's Office, United States Army.

*Fort Kearny and the Forty-Niners*

The discovery of gold in California early in 1848 had a pronounced effect upon travel over the Oregon Trail and past Fort Kearny in 1849. News of the discovery did not reach the Atlantic Seaboard until in the fall of 1848, too late for travel that year, but the spring of 1849 saw the movement well under way. Hubert Howe Bancroft estimated that some 42,000 emigrants passed over the Platte route to California in 1849. By June first 4,400 wagons, averaging four men and ten animals to a wagon had passed Fort Kearny, according to actual count made at the fort. These did not include the number passing along the north bank of the Platte, which could not be seen from the fort to be counted, although many of these emigrants in need of assistance crossed to the south bank of the river and came to the fort.

"Pawnee" wrote from Fort Kearny, May 21, "The tide of emigration towards the land of promise, via the South Pass, may now be considered as having fairly set in. Daily, hourly, the number of wagons is increasing, and the anxious races of gold diggers multiply upon us astonishingly. Today 214 wagons passed this post, making in all 1,203." Counting four persons to a wagon, he estimated that nearly 5,000 "were already on their way to fortune." He believed that 5,000 wagons, from 20,000 to 25,000 persons, and 50,000 animals would pass the fort during the season.<sup>3</sup>

On June 2 Lieutenant Woodbury reported to Chief of Engineers Totten that "the fort was very poorly prepared to give the emigrants the assistance which very many have required, even at this post, so near the beginning of their journey."<sup>4</sup>

During the winter of 1848-1849 Captain Charles F. Ruff's command numbering one hundred twenty-seven men had been adequate to garrison the fort. But with

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<sup>3</sup>*The Republican*, St. Louis, Missouri, June 9, 1849.

<sup>4</sup>Woodbury to Totten, June 2, 1849.

increasing travel over the trail, and the consequent demands made upon the fort, for protection and even for medical aid and supplies of various kinds, additional troops became necessary. Therefore, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin L. E. Bonneville, that picturesque officer of French birth, was sent from Fort Leavenworth with Companies F, G, and I, of the Sixth Infantry, and arrived at Fort Kearny on May 29. On the following day he relieved Captain Ruff of the command of the fort.<sup>5</sup> The five buildings and two stables, erected by Lieutenant Woodbury the preceding year, were inadequate for the larger garrison. Lieutenant Woodbury returned to the post from St. Louis May 21, and immediately commenced the erection of a hospital, which was sorely needed. He also hoped to erect, with the assistance of Lieutenant Andrew J. Donelson, also of the corps of Engineers, two double blocks of officers' quarters and one block of soldiers' quarters.<sup>6</sup> Lieutenant Donelson reported for duty at the fort on June 2 and four days later Lieutenant Woodbury left for the vicinity of Laramie Creek, two hundred seventy-five miles west of Fort Kearny, there to establish the second of the military posts "along the route to Oregon."<sup>7</sup> Lieutenant Donelson was left in charge of the work of construction planned at Fort Kearny for the summer of 1849.

Great difficulty was encountered in carrying out the building program and only the hospital was completed that year. All of the buildings erected up to this time had been made of sod blocks or of adobe. The hospital was to be a frame building, and progress upon it was slow. Major Osborne Cross, of the Quartermaster Corps, who inspected the fort early in June, said in his report, "the hospital was the only building which was being erected." Lieutenant Woodbury was unable "to progress very rapidly for want of proper materials. Wood can be obtained on the

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<sup>5</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny (Adjutant General's Office), May, 1849.

<sup>6</sup>Woodbury to Totten, June 2, 1849.

<sup>7</sup>*Idem.*

Grand Island," but lumber, principally cottonwood, was scarce, and inferior for building.<sup>8</sup> Inadequate quarters seriously handicapped the garrison in furnishing the necessary aid to travellers over the trail.

Fort Kearny rendered many services to the emigrants. The troops afforded protection against Indian attack, an ever present danger because of the hostility between the Sioux and the Pawnees in the vicinity. "Pawnee" on May 18, related that the Sioux again were attacking the Pawnees. Within twenty miles of Fort Kearny a war party of Sioux came upon a small band of Pawnees and took three scalps and a small boy prisoner. A detachment was sent from the fort to protect the Pawnees.<sup>9</sup> Major Cross referred to this protection in his report above mentioned. "It is very well located to keep in check the Pawnee and Sioux nations, and is also a great protection to the emigrants who travel this route to California and Oregon."<sup>10</sup>

The blacksmith shop at the fort was a crowded place. After two hundred miles of the journey weaknesses in equipment began to appear, and a halt was made for repairs. Many of the emigrants were inexperienced in plains travel, and all sorts of wagons were seen on the trail. Horses, mules and oxen were used to draw the wagons, and these animals had to be carefully shod to stand up on the hard, rough trail. John H. Benson, who made the trip from Louisa County, Iowa, to California in 1849 said of the equipment and animals used.

Oxen for draught purposes, were generally used. It was claimed that they possessed advantages over horses and mules. The animals had, of course, to subsist entirely upon grass and water found by the road. It was claimed they were easier to control, as horses and mules could not be turned loose to graze or wander at night without being hobbled. The Indians were known to be fond of horses but to care little for cattle, and this would tend to render the ox train less liable to attack by them.

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<sup>8</sup>Senate Documents, 31st Congress, Second Session, Number 1, Serial 587.

<sup>9</sup>*The Republican*, St. Louis, Missouri, June 4, 1849.

<sup>10</sup>Senate Documents, 31st Congress, Second Session, Number 1, Serial 587.

These arguments, however, would seem to have little to do with the case, as horses and mules, in sufficient numbers, were not available, and oxen were used of necessity, regardless of choice. There were, however, some horse and mule trains and some, possibly many, of the ox trains had two or more horses owned in common by the company, which were intended for scout and emergency duty and for use in rounding up the oxen should they stampede or stray away. The usual team consisted of three or four yoke of oxen, and there were generally three or four men with each wagon.<sup>11</sup>

M. Powell, writing of his journey of 1849 in the *Cincinnati Gazette*, mentioned the need of the blacksmith shop at the fort, "Found plenty of soldiers, and a blacksmith's shop. The latter we have occasion to call pretty loudly for, considering the little experience each one of our party has had in that line of business. The venerable descendant of Vulcan, with his assistants, seems to be in great demand, as a large number of emigrants are waiting here to make repairs, and to give their mules time to recover from the effects of over-driving."<sup>12</sup> Each wagon carried some blacksmith tools and each wagon train had at least one anvil. But even so equipped, many trains were no better supplied with men who could do blacksmith work than was Powell's train.

Most of the wagon trains camped a few days in the vicinity of the fort before going on. The necessary shoeing of draft animals and wagon repairing usually took several days, and nearly every train had a number of animals which had to be rested before continuing the journey. Almost every diary describing the overland journey of 1849 speaks of "the large number of emigrants encamped about the fort."<sup>13</sup> Here, also, letters were written to the folks "back home" and were mailed at the fort. Many of the diaries mention the opportunity of communicating with friends and relatives left behind. One said, "We have made our noon halt, within a few rods of the fort, and

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<sup>11</sup>John H. Benson, MS Diary, p. ii.

<sup>12</sup>M. Powell, "Overland Journey to California," *Littell's Living Age*, XXIII (October 27, 1849), 155-158.

<sup>13</sup>Kimball Webster, *The Gold Seekers of '49*, pp. 49-50.



we learn that we can send letters to the states, by the regular mail, postage ten cents."<sup>14</sup> Letters were sometimes sent back by men returning, and there was always a large number of those whose enthusiasm or supplies had given out, or who were just plain homesick, and were on their way back home. Benson, in his entry for May 13, just a week after starting from St. Joseph, says that, "a few minutes ago a man came into camp, on horseback, going back home. He had been over one hundred miles out from here. He assigned no reason except he was homesick. Some of the boys told him he would go home and go to plowing corn. He said he was not particular about what he did so long as he got home."<sup>15</sup> Alonzo Delano writes "that during the evening [of June 4, 1849], two young men came to our camp on mules, who had turned their faces homeward without supplies. They said that they were from Indianapolis, Indiana; that their mules had given out, and that they had determined to return, depending on the charity of the emigrants for their subsistence, which no doubt was fully and freely accorded them." Letters given them were mailed at St. Joseph.<sup>16</sup>

By the time the emigrants got to Fort Kearny most of them found that their wagons were too heavily laden. Indeed, many had discovered this distressing fact even before the first three hundred miles of the journey had been accomplished. When it is remembered "that the emigration of the 'forty-niners' was the largest and most heterogeneous that the plains had seen . . . that there were many who had failed at everything," it is not to be wondered that "many were so inexperienced that they began to discard equipment that they could not carry before they reached Fort Kearney on the Platte."<sup>17</sup> Benson saw

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<sup>14</sup>Elizabeth Page, *Wagons West* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930), pp. 129-131.

<sup>15</sup>Benson, *op. cit.*, p. iii.

<sup>16</sup>Alonzo Delano, *Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings* (Auburn and Buffalo: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1854), p. 67.

<sup>17</sup>Frederic L. Paxson, *History of the American Frontier*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924), p. 375; David Morris Potter, ed., *Trail to California: The Overland Journal of Vincent Geiger and Wakeman Bryarly* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), p. 87.

many emigrants discarding supplies and equipment at Fort Kearny to lighten their wagons. A number of them were doubling teams and leaving part of their wagons. One of Benson's companions went to an encampment near the fort, "and bought for \$10, a fine wagon which had cost \$110. He said he thought he could have bought it for \$5 but did not have the face to offer less than \$10. He left his on the road for firewood or any use that might be made of it." In fact, wood was so scarce that discarded wagons were often used for fuel and in his entry for May 31 Benson says, "we saw here where the wood work of several wagons had been burned and the iron left. This is the first time I have ever been where wood is worth more than iron, where a piece of wood as small as your hand would be picked up, and the whole iron of wagons left."<sup>18</sup>

"The great majority now crossing the plains," wrote "Pawnee" on May 26, "were profoundly ignorant when starting, of what was before them—had no idea of what an outfit consisted of." Almost every wagon which left the frontier was overloaded. Saw-mills, pickaxes, shovels, anvils, blacksmith's tools, featherbeds, rocking chairs, and a thousand other useless articles filled the wagons. They soon found that they were too heavily laden, and by the time Fort Kearny was reached, the surplus weight was discarded. The road was lined with every conceivable object which had been thrown overboard.<sup>19</sup>

Not only was equipment of all kinds discarded during the halt at the fort but often food supplies were thrown away. Delano was at the fort on May 23 and describes the scene, "Loading our wagons too heavily with cumbrous and weighty articles, and with unnecessary supplies of provisions, had been a general fault, and the cattle began to exhibit signs of fatigue. We resolved, therefore, to part with everything which was not absolutely necessary, and to shorten the dimension of our wagons so that they would run easier." He further states that others had done the

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<sup>18</sup>Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>19</sup>*The Republican*, St. Louis, Missouri, June 16, 1849.

same and that piles of cast-off goods were in evidence everywhere. Most of the emigrants, unable to take the goods with them, left them in neat piles so that anyone who could use any of the articles might take them. Others, displaying traits of meanness and selfishness, poured turpentine over sugar and mixed salt and dirt with flour. This, of course, ruined the foodstuffs so that no one could use them. Mr. Delano remarks that such instances, however, were not very numerous and that most people were considerate of the needs of others and did not destroy even cast off equipment and supplies.<sup>20</sup>

Benson, who was at the fort five days later, tells of seeing a pile of goods with a sign posted announcing one hundred pounds of flour for sale at fifty cents, one hundred pounds of bacon, fifty cents, and one hundred pounds of dried beef also fifty cents. Wagons and supplies were offered at any price they would bring. A few miles out from Fort Kearny he "saw two featherbeds that had been thrown away, and meat and beans were strewn all along the road."<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact that many emigrants were forced to abandon certain supplies in an effort to lighten their loads, many of the travellers, especially those who passed over the trail a little earlier than the main rush, found themselves in dire want of food and other supplies by the time Fort Kearny was reached. Most of these had undertaken the journey without sufficient money to buy the necessary equipment, and some of the inexperienced ones had bought unwisely. On February 20, 1849, Captain Ruff wrote to Adjutant General R. Jones, "I am deeply impressed with the humanity, indeed the necessity, of permitting the commanding officers of the several posts of this route, the exercise of a sound discretion, in making issues of provisions, to such emigrant parties of our own citizens who either in returning from or going to Oregon, who frequently stand much in need of instant and sub-

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<sup>20</sup>Delano, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

<sup>21</sup>Benson, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

stantial relief. Parties have passed during the last fall who without being so relieved and by the private charity of individuals, must have perished from want."<sup>22</sup>

The halt at Fort Kearny also afforded opportunity for the trains to reorganize their government. Some of the smaller parties "doubled up" with other small parties, and this necessitated the political organization of the new larger group. Too small a train, four or five wagons, did not offer sufficient protection in case of Indian attack, while too large a train was apt to retard progress. Page, in his diary, told of his train making an average of one hundred miles a week with fifteen wagons, and that he and his companions did not want more wagons because a larger number would slow up the train "especially at crossing streams."<sup>23</sup>

Most of the trains consisted of men from different localities who had met on the trail. Consequently, there were persons travelling together who were but slightly acquainted with one another. Some sort of organization was necessary for the proper management of the train. Usually some form of a constitution was drawn up setting forth the obligations and privileges of the members of the train. This document generally provided for the election of a captain and wagon master. The captain was first in command and had general oversight over all of the affairs of the train, while the wagon master was charged particularly with the details of the march, such as the place in the train of each wagon, and the corraling of the draught animals at night. Most of the trains organized upon leaving the Missouri River and retained this organization at least for the first part of the trip or until they admitted new wagons. Benson says that their trains, the sixth day out, "laid in camp and organized. Twenty wagons were taken in. We now have a train of thirty-seven wagons. Matthews was elected captain, Anderson wagonmaster. We adopted a constitution, which I think was a good one, and the

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<sup>22</sup>Ruff to Jones, February 26, 1849.

<sup>23</sup>Page, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

people generally were pleased with it. The Louisa company retained its organization as a unit in the larger company."<sup>24</sup>

F. A. J. Gray, who crossed the plains in 1850, described the government of his train which applied equally to trains of the preceding year. He points out that the "company was organized before starting and G. W. Read was elected captain. The agreement was that the company should be a purely democratic one. The captain was to call meetings of the company upon request and that the company was to decide by vote all questions and all members should abide by the decision strictly."<sup>25</sup>

Beginning with 1849, a somewhat different, and probably more lawless, type of emigrant came upon the Oregon Trail. "Before that," writes Ghent, "were the pioneers—missionaries and home seekers—in the main a homogeneous folk, orderly and industrious, the founders of an empire. After that, beginning with the gold rush . . . new elements crowded the Trail. There was still, and would continue to be, home-seekers in vast numbers; but there came also adventurers, restless wanderers, gamblers, gunmen, thieves, loose women and all the misfits of a mal-adjusted world."<sup>26</sup> This new element made more necessary than ever the rough and ready justice of the frontier.

There was an old saying among the early trappers that there was "no law west of Leavenworth," but with the establishment of Fort Kearny, law was pushed westward. Not in the sense that the region was organized politically and a system of courts established, for this did not come until the organization of the Territory of Nebraska in 1854, but in the sense that the garrison at the fort represented the government of the United States and would assist the emigrants to maintain order and mete out justice. The moving communities were organized, and opinion among the members of the train supported the maintenance

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<sup>24</sup>Benson, *op. cit.*, p. iii.

<sup>25</sup>F. A. J. Gray, *MS Diary*, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup>W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon* (New York: Longman's Green and Company, 1929), p. 97.

of order, a thing very necessary where all sorts of people were thrown together. Diaries of the forty-niners give ample evidence of the enforcement of the will of the majority and of the adjudication of both civil and criminal cases. Jesse Applegate, in his "A Day with the Cow Column," although written of the migration of 1843, gives a good account of the administration of justice in a civil case. So nearly did his recital of the facts describe the situation as found by Ezra Meeker in 1852 that Meeker quotes it at length in his "Oregon Trail."<sup>27</sup> Applegate tells of the trial of a case, "between a proprietor and a young man who has undertaken to do a man's service on the journey for board and bed. Many such engagements exist and much interest is taken in the manner this high court, from which there is no appeal, will define the right of each party in such engagements. The council was a high court in the most exalted sense. It was a Senate composed of the ablest and most respected fathers of the emigration. It exercised both legislative and judicial powers, and its laws and decisions proved it equal and worthy of the high trust reposed in it. Its sessions were usually held on days when the caravan was not moving. It first took the state of the little commonwealth into consideration; revised or repealed rules defective or obsolete, and enacted such others as exigencies seemed to require. The commonwealth being cared for, it next resolved itself into a court, to hear and settle private disputes and grievances. The offender and aggrieved appeared before it, witnesses were examined, and the parties were heard by themselves and sometimes were examined, and the parties were heard by themselves and sometimes by counsel. The judges thus being made fully acquainted with the case, and being in no way influenced or cramped by technicalities, decided all cases according to their merits. There was but little use for lawyers be-

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<sup>27</sup>Ezra Meeker, *Personal Experiences on the Oregon Trail* (St. Louis: McAdoo Printing Company, 1912), pp. 13-14.

fore this court, for no plea was entertained which was calculated to defeat the ends of justice."<sup>28</sup>

Criminal cases were tried in much the same manner. Meeker says, "When we stepped foot upon the right bank of the Missouri River we were outside the pale of civil law. We were within the Indian country where no organized civil government existed. Some people and some writers have assumed that each man was 'a law unto himself' and free to do his own will, dependent, of course upon his ability to enforce it. Nothing could be further from the facts than this assumption, as evil-doers soon found out to their discomfort. No general organization for law and order was effected, but the American instinct for fair play and a hearing prevailed."<sup>29</sup>

Often cases were heard and settled during the halt at Fort Kearny, and sometimes the officers of the garrison were called upon to assist in the settlement. Delano tells of an incident which occurred in May, 1849: "A day or two previous to our arrival, an emigrant was tried here [Fort Kearny] for shooting one of his comrades. He was taking his family to California, and when a few miles beyond the fort, a man offered a gross insult to his wife. In a country where there was no law—where redress could not be had by legal process—he determined to protect his own honor, and raising his rifle, shot the scoundrel down. His companions took him back to the fort (with his consent), where an investigation into the circumstances was made, and he was honorably acquitted."<sup>30</sup> Never afterwards, when witnesses in his defense might be hard to secure, could he be brought to trial for that alleged crime.

Sometimes the individual took justice into his own hands. "Pawnee" saw an example of this. "A serious difficulty occurred a day or two since between two emigrants

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<sup>28</sup>Jesse Applegate, "A Day With the Cow Column," in Maude A. Rucker, *The Oregon Trail and Some of Its Blazers* (New York: W. Neale, 1930), pp. 78-79.

<sup>29</sup>Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup>Delano, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

in this vicinity, in which one of them by the name of Harris lost his life. It appeared that this man had been making advances toward the wife of a man by the name of Shields, which coming to his (Shield's) ears, induced him to lay open his (Harris') head with an axe. He died instantly."<sup>31</sup>

Nearly every diary of the migration of 1849 tells of the great cholera scourge of that year. The fort could be of little assistance to the afflicted ones, however, since the person suffering from the disease usually died or recovered within one or two days. Benson reports several deaths from cholera before his party reached Fort Kearny, and Cross reported cholera among the emigrants camped around the fort the latter part of May. The post records show but one case of cholera at the fort, that one being in a recruit just arrived from Fort Leavenworth. He was admitted to the hospital on June 28 and treated by Assistant Surgeon William Hammond. The patient recovered after having been administered "calomel 15 gr., opium 1 gr., applied blister to abdomen, and at 1 P.M. 30 gr. calomel."<sup>32</sup>

The report of Assistant Surgeon Richard H. Coolidge, from which the above quotation is taken, says that the illness which caused the death of so many of the emigrants in 1849 and the years immediately following was not cholera, as commonly referred to, but instead a form of acute diarrhea, probably caused by the drinking of impure water. "The character of the Platte valley here at Fort Kearney," he writes, "is that of a flat prairie, composed of sand and clay, in which, when the latter predominates, water is found standing in small pools; but when the sand is most abundant, the water passes through it like a sieve, and is quite drained away. The water is generally clear and cool, but much of the sickness among the emigrants has been attributed to its use. This water is evidently de-

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<sup>31</sup>*The Republican*, St. Louis, Missouri, June 9, 1849.

<sup>32</sup>Senate Executive Documents, 34th Congress, First Session, Serial 827, p. 75.





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### EXAMINING RELICS FROM FORT KEARNY

Left to Right, Chaplain J. W. Beard, Portland, Oregon, who with Mrs. Beard re-traced the Oregon Trail this summer; Mrs. George Raffety, Newark; Mrs. Beard; and Charles A. Chappell, Minden.

rived from infiltration from the higher levels and bluffs, which in this hidden manner discharge their surplus moisture into the river."<sup>33</sup> The dread disease followed the emigrants until the higher altitudes of the mountains were reached, but claimed most of its victims along the Platte from Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie. Various estimates are placed upon the number of emigrants dying from it, but probably no less than five thousand fell victim to it in 1849 and the early fifties.

Lieutenant Colonel Bonneville remained in command of Fort Kearny from May 30, 1849, until July 16 when he "received his appointment as Lieutenant Colonel of the Fourth Infantry July 12 with orders to repair to the Headquarters of the Army, New York, and left the post July 16 for Fort Leavenworth." He was relieved on that day by Brevet Major Robert Hall Chilton, of the First Regiment of Dragoons.<sup>34</sup>

Late in the summer of 1849 hostilities again broke out between the Sioux and the Pawnee Indians. It was necessary to send a detachment of troops from the fort to the Blue River, some fifty miles east of the post to quell them. On October 23 one private was seriously and six privates slightly wounded "in a skirmish with a marauding band of Pawnee Indians." Six days later one private was killed in action "in a skirmish with the Pawnee Indians on the Platte River near Fort Kearney."<sup>35</sup> During the summer the Pawnees had gone on several horse stealing expeditions against the Sioux. On one of these expeditions the Sioux not only ward off the attack but took fifteen Pawnee scalps as well.

Work on the hospital building continued during the summer, and the building, consisting of four rooms, was completed by fall. The officers' and soldiers' quarters were not completed until the following year. Lack of quarters for the troops caused Adjutant General Jones to authorize

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<sup>33</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>34</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, July, 1849.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, October, 1849.

Major Chilton to order one of the infantry companies to Fort Leavenworth for the winter.<sup>36</sup> The post returns do not show troop movement, however, as Major Chilton kept his entire command of fourteen officers and 135 men at the post during the winter.<sup>37</sup>

### *Fort Kearny During the Fifties*

Emigration begun in the forties continued through the fifties. A major portion of the overland travel to California and Oregon passed over the Oregon Trail. Fort Kearny became a fixed and established point on that trail, its garrison affording protection in time of Indian danger and its storehouse providing food and supplies to stranded or impecunious travelers far from home.

The commanding officer at the fort was authorized by law to issue or sell supplies from the government warehouse, upon requisition, to such persons as he deemed worthy of aid. The officers were very careful about approving such requests, but despite this many were accepted. Large numbers of persons were inexperienced in plains travel, and because of unwise selection of goods, found themselves in need when Fort Kearny was reached. Accident, or robbery, deprived others of food. The fort rendered necessary aid in these cases, and it was an important service to those in distress.

Unrest among the Sioux Indians west of Fort Kearny became noticeable during the summer of 1854. Guards were furnished for emigrant trains, and depredations by the savages were reduced to a minimum. The following year a large force was sent to subdue the Sioux. Fort Kearny, Fort Laramie, and Fort Pierre were used as bases of operation in this campaign.

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<sup>36</sup>House Executive Documents, 31st Congress, First Session, pp. 185-186.

<sup>37</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, December, 1849 to April, 1850.

Conditions in Utah caused President Pierce to send an army, under Brigadier General W. S. Harney, to that territory in 1857. While no troops were ordered upon this campaign from the garrison at Fort Kearny, the fort became the scene of great activity during the operations. The western posts were not sufficiently manned to furnish the needed troops. The regiments were assembled at Fort Leavenworth, and from there ordered west. Forts Kearny and Laramie were used as concentration points for men and supplies.

Communication on the plains was slow during the fifties. Post reports or returns were made up by the commanding officer at the end of each month, and one copy was forwarded at once to the Adjutant General's office. The records show that it took these returns more than a month to reach Washington. The return for December, 1850, was received at the Adjutant General's Office the following February 10. The return for September, 1851, arrived on November 12, while the return for October, 1856, was not received until December 9. The return for April, 1858, was delivered at Washington May 24, and made the best time of any of the returns of the decade.<sup>38</sup>

Orders from Washington were likewise slow in reaching the western military posts. General Order No. 3, "directing the farm culture to be discontinued," was dated February 9, 1854, and was received from the Adjutant General March 9. Order No. 4, of April 30, 1856, "forbidding all persons from settling on the military reserves," was delivered at the fort on the following June 10. The extension of the telegraph copy of a letter from the Adjutant General under date of July 15, 1857, was received on August 12. The telegraph line did not reach Fort Kearny until in November, 1860, but each westward extension of the new means of communication shortened the time required for important orders to reach the fort. Mail carriers for several years formed a part of the personnel at

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, December, 1850 to April, 1858.

Fort Kearny. The return for September, 1851, listed two civilians so employed at \$50 per month each. The return for December, 1857, likewise included two carriers, one at \$74 per month and the other at \$60.<sup>39</sup>

No provision was made by the Federal Government for postal facilities to the plains until 1850. Prior to that time all mail to and from Fort Kearny was carried by army couriers. During that year, however, the United States Post Office Department entered into a contract with Colonel Samuel H. Woodson of Independence, Missouri, for the transportation of mail from that place to Salt Lake City. The service was to be monthly each way, and the Oregon Trail was to be followed. Difficulty was experienced in maintaining the monthly schedule during the winter, but during the other seasons of the year it was maintained regularly. This gave the fort a monthly postal service in addition to that rendered by its own couriers.

Monthly service over this route past Fort Kearny continued until 1858, when the Woodson contract expired. The new contract, entered into with John M. Hockaday, provided for a weekly service between Independence and Salt Lake City over the same route. This gave Fort Kearny a weekly service and greatly facilitated communication between the post and its departmental headquarters. After the inauguration of this weekly mail service the post returns do not list mail carriers as being employed regularly. Couriers were used only in case of emergency and were selected from the troops themselves.

Despite the great improvement in service, many civilians were not satisfied with the facilities offered, and thought that a daily service should be provided. Chief among these was Senator William M. Gwin of California. In the fall of 1854 he had ridden to Washington over the central route by way of Salt Lake City, the South Pass and Fort Kearny. On a part of the trip he was accompanied by Mr. B. F. Ficklin, general superintendent of the firm of

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<sup>39</sup>*Idem.*

Russell, Majors and Waddell. Out of this trip grew the idea of the pony express.<sup>40</sup>

Under the plan developed by Senator Gwin and William H. Russell, president of the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, the service was to be weekly between St. Joseph, Missouri, and San Francisco, California. The mail was to be carried on horse back, the riders going day and night, and the time between the two points was to be nine days. Senator Gwin was prompted by two motives in his advocacy of such an enterprise. First, it would greatly facilitate communication between the East and his own state; and, second, it would make possible more rapid transmission of orders and letters to the western military posts.

Plans for the organization of the faster service were rapidly developed during the winter of 1859-1860. No government subsidy was provided, although Mr. Russell hoped that such would be available after the express was under way. The necessary stations enroute were equipped, horses procured, and riders employed. One of the division stations enroute was established at Fort Kearny, where the firm already had a station for its stage and freight service. The service was inaugurated on April 3, 1860, when riders started simultaneously from St. Joseph and San Francisco.

The enterprise was strictly a private one and was, therefore, regarded askance by the postal authorities. On April 10, one week after the service had begun, Senator Gwin spoke in the Senate on behalf of a petition from the Legislature of California "in favor of the establishment of a daily mail between some point on the Mississippi River and some point in California." The Senate had, a short time previously, inquired into the expediency of establishing a semi-weekly mail between St. Joseph and Placerville. The Committee on Military Affairs had favored the proposal, because it would afford better communication with the western military posts.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>W. F. Bailey, "The Pony Express," *The Century Magazine*, LVI, 882.

<sup>41</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, First Session, p. 1628.

Communication between the Headquarters of the Department of the West, St. Louis, and the western posts was greatly speeded up by the faster facilities of the Pony Express. Visscher says that "the Pony Express, as a means of communication between the two remote coasts, was largely employed by the government . . ."<sup>42</sup> The post returns from Fort Kearny amply bear witness to the truth of this statement. More than three weeks was required in 1858 for a letter from the St. Louis Headquarters to reach Fort Kearny. The returns for 1859 and 1860, up to the time of the beginning of the Pony Express, show three weeks to be about the average time for orders to get out from St. Louis. The return of June, 1860, has this significant entry, "Letter, June 26, Headquarters, Department of the West, Received, July 1." The July return records the fact that a letter dated St. Louis, July 3, was received July 13, and one of July 25 was received July 31.

From St. Joseph to Fort Kearny, a distance of nearly 300 miles, the Pony Express riders had comparatively easy going. The trail was not difficult to follow and there was little danger of Indian attack. "From Fort Kearny on," however, "the rider had to keep a 'stirrup eye' out for Indians. At first the riders were armed with carbines, as well as two revolvers per man. The carbines were soon discarded, as were the extra revolvers. The usual armament was one 'navy' revolver. Occasionally a rider carried an extra, loaded cylinder for his revolver in case of a fight with several opponents at close quarters. Even this extra weight was begrudged."<sup>43</sup> The garrison at the fort did everything it could to afford protection for the mail. In August Captain Samuel D. Sturgis was sent out "on a scout" into the Indian Country,<sup>44</sup> and on September 11

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<sup>42</sup>William L. Visscher, *The Pony Express* (Chicago: Rand, McNally and Company, 1908), p. 28.

<sup>43</sup>Arthur Chapman, *The Pony Express* (New York: G. P. Putnam Sons, 1932), pp. 198-199.

<sup>44</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, August, 1860.

Captain Alfred Sully, commanding Company F, Second Infantry, was sent among the Pawnees to reconnoiter.<sup>45</sup>

When the Pony Express was begun on April 3, 1860, the newly formed Western Union Telegraph Company had extended its wires westward as far as St. Joseph, Missouri, and this had been the determining factor in the selection of that place as the starting point for the Express. A week before Senator Gwin had spoken in the Senate in behalf of Senate File No. 84, "to facilitate communication between the Atlantic and Pacific States by electric telegraph." This bill provided for a \$50,000 annual subsidy to the Sibley interests for use by the government of a telegraph line to be built from some point west of the Mississippi River, connecting with the eastern lines, to San Francisco. The government was to have a priority on use of the line or lines built and the Secretary of War was to have the privilege of connecting them by telegraph with any military posts of the United States.<sup>46</sup>

By November, 1860, the Missouri and Western Telegraph Company, a subsidiary of the Western Union Telegraph Company, had completed its line from Brownville, Nebraska, on the Missouri River, by way of Omaha, to Fort Kearny. "There being no room about the military quarters at Fort Kearney suitable for the telegraph office when the line reached there, the table, instruments, battery and other paraphernalia belonging to the company were placed in the sod building erected in the later 50's by Mr. Moses Sydenham, the first postmaster at Fort Kearny, who was at that time proprietor of a small book, stationery and news depot in connection with the post office. Small as it was it did a splendid business for a frontier enterprise in pioneer days. Being a thoroughly wide-awake and progressive man, Mr. Sydenham generously consented to

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, September, 1860.

<sup>46</sup>*Congressional Globe*, 36th Congress, First Session, pp. 1292-1293.

<sup>47</sup>Frank A. Root and William E. Connelley, *The Overland Stage to California* (Topeka, 1901), pp. 133-134.



allow the operator to come into his building and occupy a corner."<sup>47</sup> The first operator at Fort Kearny was Dick Ellsworth.<sup>48</sup>

As the western terminus of the telegraph line, Fort Kearny assumed new importance as a Pony Express station. Here dispatches from the east were taken on west by the riders. "My first contact with the telegraph company," writes William Campbell, a former Pony Express rider, "was at Fort Kearney, at the western end of the telegraph line, where I stopped to pick up telegrams that traveled the rest of the way west by Pony Express. I shall always remember the kindness of Mr. Ellsworth, operator of the Western Union office at Fort Kearney. He was always ready to do a favor for the riders and usually had coffee on hand. It was just prior to the Civil War and Mr. Ellsworth furnished us with news of the impending struggle. I would sit and eat cookies, and hear the news, until the last minute, then go and maintain my schedule."<sup>49</sup>

Mr. Campbell also tells of the hard ride he had from Fort Kearny with President Lincoln's first message to Congress. "The Pony Express was put to the test carrying this message; we got it through from St. Joseph to San Francisco in seven days and eighteen hours. We made another fast run with the news "that Fort Sumter had been fired upon."

One night, while on his relay a short distance west of Fort Kearny, Mr. Campbell was pursued by a pack of wolves. Once he spent twenty-four hours in the saddle carrying the mail 120 miles to Fairfield with snow on the ground two or three feet deep and the mercury around zero. He ascertained where the trail lay by watching the tall weeds on either side and often had to get off and lead his horse. When he got to Fort Kearny there was no rider to go on with the mail, so he went on to Fairfield twenty

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<sup>48</sup>Donal McNicol, "The Overland Telegraph," in the report of the Forty-fifth Annual Reunion of the Old Time Telegrapher's and Historical Association, Omaha, September 11, 12, and 13, 1928.

<sup>49</sup>*The Kearney Tribune*, November 1, 1923.

miles away. It was a common occurrence for a rider to go beyond his own relay when another rider was unable to carry on.

Fort Kearny remained the western terminus of the telegraph line until the summer of 1861. In the fall of the preceding year the Western Union Telegraph Company had selected Edward Creighton, a well known eastern contractor and line builder, to make a survey of the route west of Fort Kearny. Facing the rigors of winter, he set out from Fort Kearny by stage coach to make the survey. He went up the Platte River to Fort Laramie, through the South Pass and down to Salt Lake City. Here, he conferred with Brigham Young, who promised him his heartiest support.

Desiring also to confer with the officials of the California State Telegraph Company at San Francisco, Mr. Creighton left Salt Lake City by saddle and mule in the dead of winter. To one used to such travel the journey would have been strenuous enough, but to an easterner unaccustomed to riding a mule, it was doubly so. Nevertheless he made the arduous trip successfully and conferred with the men he had wished to see. Returning to Omaha, in the spring, he made his report to the company April 12, 1861, and expressed his willingness to undertake the construction of the line to Salt Lake City. This offer settled the question of route and Mr. Creighton's proposal was accepted. The line was to be built from Fort Kearny to Salt Lake City by way of Fort Laramie and the South Pass.

Steps necessary for the organization of the work were immediately taken by Mr. Creighton. Transportation of supplies and material alone required more than one thousand oxen, two hundred mules and four hundred wagons. The question of poles was a serious one, for much of the route lay through a region absolutely devoid of timber. Fortunately, a supply of red cedar was found near the junction of the North and South Platte Rivers, and these trees furnished the cedar used for poles. Many of the poles

had to be hauled more than one hundred miles to Fort Kearny, where the work was to begin.

Specifications for the construction of the line were carefully drawn up. There were to be not less than twenty-five poles to the mile, number nine wire of the best quality, three hundred fifty pounds to the mile, was to be used. The line was to be insulated, in the best manner then known, by the use of "nigger head" insulators (glass insulators with wooden caps). Repeaters of the most approved type were to be used so that messages could be sent at least as far as Salt Lake City without having to be relayed.<sup>50</sup>

Work was begun in July at Fort Kearny. Mr. Creighton had four hundred men, all heavily armed and with necessary provisions, including one hundred head of cattle for beef. Five hundred head of oxen and mules and more than one hundred wagons were used for the transportation of materials and provisions. The line was built at a rate of from five to six miles a day, the wire being strung on the poles as soon as they were set. The pioneer work done by the stage company and the Pony Express in establishing stations along the route followed by the telegraph was very helpful to the construction crews, in that aid could be secured every ten miles if needed to withstand an Indian attack, or in some other emergency.

Very little trouble with the Indians was experienced in the building of the line west from Fort Kearny. Mr. Creighton and the construction crews did everything they could to cause the line to be regarded with awe by the red men. "With the idea of impressing the Indians with the mysterious power of the wire express, Creighton, then at Fort Bridger, asked Washakie, Chief of the Shoshones, if he would like to talk with a Sioux Chieftain at Horse-shoe station, a few miles west of Fort Laramie. The Shoshone chieftain asked a question, which the Sioux answered. Then followed several questions and answers, back and forth, between the two chieftains. Greatly mystified, but

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<sup>50</sup>McNicol, *op. cit.*

hardly convinced that some trick had not been played upon them, the chiefs agreed to meet at a place midway between the stations and compare notes. This was done, with the result that the Indian tribes soon learned, through their chieftains, that the wire was really the instrument of Manitou."<sup>51</sup>

A similar incident a few years later is told by General Grenville M. Dodge. While making surveys for the Pacific Railroad, he told of the attitude of the Indians toward the telegraph line.

When the overland telegraph was built they were taught to respect it and not destroy it. This was done after the line was opened to Fort Laramie by stationing several of their most intelligent chiefs at Fort Laramie and others at Fort Kearney, the two posts being 300 miles apart, and having them talk to each other over the wire and note the time sent and received. Then we had them mount their fleetest horses and ride as fast as they could until they met at old Jule's ranch, at the mouth of the Lodge Pole, this being about half way between Kearney and Laramie. Of course this was astonishing and mysterious to the Indians. Thereafter, you could often see Indians with their heads against the telegraph poles, listening to the peculiar sound the wind makes as it runs along the wires through the Insulators. They thought, and said, it was 'Big Medicine' talking. I never could convince them that I could go to the telegraph poles the same as they did and tell them what was said, or send a message for them to some chief far away, as they had often seen me use my traveling instruments, cut into the line, and send and receive messages.<sup>52</sup>

Frank A. Root, who was a stage driver along the telegraph line during the sixties, relates that the Indians seldom molested the line. He said that occasionally desperadoes would cut the line so that they might better escape after the commission of a crime, and that the mischief was often charged to the Indians, but that they were nearly always not the guilty ones. "The single wire reaching from pole to pole which passed through their hunting grounds they considered as something sacred, having been taught

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<sup>51</sup>Chapman, *op. cit.*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>52</sup>J. R. Perkins, *Trails, Rails and War* (Indianapolis, 1929), p. 175.

that it extended east directly to the White House, and was private property, built by, and belonging exclusively to, the 'Great Father' at Washington."<sup>53</sup>

Two years had been the generally accepted time thought necessary for the completion of the line, Due, however, to the extraordinary zeal with which the work was pursued, the forks of the Platte were reached early in August and by September the line from Fort Kearny to Fort Laramie was completed. The crews working eastward from Salt Lake City, also under direction of Mr. Creighton, had made equally good progress, and by October 18, the Creighton contract from Fort Kearny to Salt Lake City, was fully completed. In the meantime work on the line westward from Salt Lake City had progressed rapidly and was finished on October 18. A few days were required to make the necessary connections in Salt Lake City and on October 24, 1861, the line from New York to San Francisco, a distance of 3,595 miles was *un fait accompli*.

The line was immediately a financial success, "Its business was large, its outlook brilliant, its position impregnable, its influence immense. It stood confessedly one of the vastest and most comprehensive of the private enterprises of the world."<sup>54</sup>

The telegraph office was maintained at Fort Kearny until the Union Pacific Railroad was built, at which time the telegraph line was moved to parallel the railroad.

With the completion of the telegraph across the continent need for the Pony Express no longer existed. On October 26, after heavy financial loss to the firm operating it, the service came officially to a close. In the words of William Campbell, "the telegraph does in a second what it took eighty young men and hundreds of horses to do when I was a rider in the Pony Express."<sup>55</sup> Truly the telegraph key had supplanted the pony.

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<sup>53</sup>Root and Connelley, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-138.

<sup>54</sup>James D. Reid, *The Telegraph in America* (New York: Derby Brothers, 1878), p. 489.

<sup>55</sup>*The Kearney Tribune*, November 1, 1923.

The outbreak of the Civil War had an immediate effect upon Fort Kearny. All regular army troops were withdrawn for service in putting down the rebellion, and volunteer regiments, largely from the State of Iowa and the Territory of Nebraska, replaced this garrison. Ordnance was likewise ordered transferred to Fort Leavenworth, leaving the post without cannon.<sup>56</sup>

Located near the dividing line between free and slave territory, Fort Kearny was the scene of many an impassioned argument between northern and southern sympathizers. The commanding officer of the fort at the outbreak of the war, Captain Charles H. Tyler, was a native of Virginia and an ardent southern man. He soon left the service of the United States and later served as a colonel in the Confederate army.<sup>57</sup>

Desertions from the volunteer regiments stationed at the fort were numerous during the war. Many of the men had enlisted with service at the battle front in mind, and were disappointed at being assigned to duty away from the theater of war. Homesickness also prompted many desertions from the post.

Withdrawal of regular army regiments and their experienced officers from Fort Kearny and the western posts was an open invitation to the Indians to resume war-like activities. During the summer of 1864 a number of outbreaks occurred both east and west of Fort Kearny, in which great property loss was suffered, and a number of settlers lost their lives. In the outbreaks along the Little Blue River, southeast of the fort, as many as twenty-five settlers were slain and several women and children carried off captives by the Indians. Troops were sent there from the post, and they, with several regiments from Kansas, drove the Indians away. At Plum Creek, west of Fort Kearny, a wagon train was burned and several men killed. Troops were sent from the fort upon receipt of telegraphic notice of the attack.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, June, 1861.

<sup>57</sup>Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the U. S. Army* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), I, 976.

<sup>58</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, August, 1864.

The Indian outbreaks made necessary the establishment of several outposts which were garrisoned and supplied from Fort Kearny. Detachments were sent from the fort and from these outposts to protect the settlers and to drive off the Indians.<sup>59</sup> During these outbreaks the stage coaches could not operate and for several weeks no travel was possible. With the resumption of travel it was necessary to send armed escorts from Fort Kearny to protect the passengers and mail from Indian attack.

Toward the close of the Civil War a company of Pawnee Indians was recruited by the army for scout duty. The Pawnees were willing to enlist for service against their enemies, the Sioux. These troopers were a picturesque military outfit but were efficient soldiers. They were stationed at Fort Kearny and were used in the operations along the overland trail.

Several companies, enlistments of former Confederates, were stationed at Fort Kearny in 1865. These men had been taken prisoners of war and had been confined in the prison camps at Chicago and Rock Island. They had had enough of fighting in the Confederate army and did not wish to be exchanged. Desirous of getting out of prison, they were willing to enlist in the United States army provided they were not required to fight against their brethren. They were sent west for duty against the Indians, and in this capacity rendered faithful service.<sup>60</sup>

### *Fort Kearny in Later Days*

Military posts established on the public domain were placed upon reservations ten miles square.<sup>61</sup> The reservation at Fort Kearny included slightly more than the 100 square miles. Scarcity of timber for lumber and fuel made

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<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, December, 1864.

<sup>60</sup>Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian War of 1864* (Topeka: Crane and Company, 1911), pp. 560-561.

<sup>61</sup>Senate Executive Documents, 33rd Congress, Second Session, II (No. 68, Serial 756), 1-3.

it necessary to reserve the heavily wooded islands in the Platte River for a distance of sixteen miles, rather than ten, to insure an adequate supply for use at the fort. Since most of the troops stationed at the post were mounted, forage for the horses was a serious problem. Except for the first few years, when the garrison was small, no persons were permitted to camp on the reservation, where all grass was required for the mounts of the troops.

In appearance Fort Kearny was not unlike other western frontier posts. The site of the fort proper was located about a half mile south of the Platte River, midway north and south within the reservation boundaries, two miles from the western edge and eight miles from the eastern. The buildings, constructed of native lumber and adobe, were situated around a rectangular parade ground four acres in extent. The flagstaff stood in the center of the parade ground.

The Indian outbreak of 1864 caused the district commander to erect, adjacent to the fort, earthworks surmounted by a wooden stockade. This enclosure comprised an acre and was sufficient to protect the entire garrison in case of Indian attack.<sup>62</sup> While Fort Kearny was never attacked by the Indians, a sentinel was fired upon in August, 1864.

In addition to the military buildings at the fort, the Overland Stage Line had been permitted to erect such buildings as were necessary for its business. The post sutler also had a building near the parade ground as did the postmaster Moses Sydenham, who in addition operated a book and stationery store. The telegraph office shared the quarters of his bookstore and was one of the most active places about the post.

Merchants were not permitted to establish themselves upon the military reservation and the post sutler had the exclusive privilege of selling to the troops. Two villages grew up at the eastern and western edge of the military

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<sup>62</sup>*Lincoln State Journal*, April 15, 1928.



reservation, beyond the jurisdiction of military authority. The one to the west, Kearney City or Dobytown, was nearer to the fort and was the more important. It derived its name from the adobe material with which the buildings were constructed.

Dobytown consisted of twelve or fifteen buildings, the majority of which were disreputable places. Whiskey was the principal article of commerce. There were several large outfitting stores including those of Brown and Lydell, and Anson Michael, which catered to the needs of the emigrants and freighters passing through. These establishments did a considerable business until the railroad made freighting a thing of the past. For a time Dobytown was the principal outfitting point west of the Missouri River.

Soldiers from the fort, and those en route to posts west, formed a large percentage of the customers of Dobytown stores. Whiskey could not be purchased from the post sutler, except under stringent regulation, if at all. But many customers in Dobytown saloons wore the uniform of the United States.<sup>63</sup> Other goods not sold by the sutler were also purchased from the nearby merchants. With the passing of the fort, Dobytown also was abandoned.

The life of the soldiers at Fort Kearny was similar to that of troops at other western posts. The early years appear to have been spent in almost as great isolation as that of a ship at sea.<sup>64</sup> Mails were slow and irregular and communication between the soldiers and relatives and friends back home was difficult. Movement on the plains almost ceased during the winter months. Through the cold weather the post was even more isolated than during the travel season.

Drill and ordinary garrison duty made up the daily routine of the soldier. The men, when used for duty not

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<sup>63</sup>The Michel Ledgers (Kearney State Teachers College).

<sup>64</sup>De Benneville Randolph Keim, *Sheridan's Troopers on the Borders* (Philadelphia, 1870), p. 59.

strictly military, such as cutting wood, putting up hay, or doing construction work, received, after 1866, extra pay.<sup>65</sup> Escort and scouting duty also occupied much of their time. One of the most hated of all assignments was that of escort to the slow moving ox trains. Protecting the faster stages was less objectionable.

Discipline immediately after the war was very lax. Desertions were surprisingly frequent from the volunteer organizations, as many as eleven men deserting in one day during the summer of 1865. Even the commissioned personnel of the post was not entirely free from deserters. With the coming of regular army regiments, most of which had enviable records of service during the war, discipline again was restored.

The introduction of the breech loading rifle after the war caused Fort Kearny, in common with other posts, to be used as a proving ground for the several models then being considered for adoption by the army. At the same time the relative merits of ammunition manufactured by the Ordnance Department, and that by private firms, was tested.<sup>66</sup>

By 1870 it was realized that the need for Fort Kearny as a military post had passed. A few years previously General William T. Sherman had visited the fort and had considered strongly ordering its abandonment at that time. During the last years of maintenance the post was garrisoned by but fifty men. Early in 1871 the War Department ordered Fort Kearny abandoned as a military post.<sup>67</sup> and the removal of its garrison to Omaha Barracks.

Squatters settled on the military reservation and the site of the old fort was put to agricultural uses. One of the squatters on the fort land was a former sergeant who had been stationed at the post. In 1873 William O. Dungan, also a former soldier, but never stationed at Fort Kearny, bought the squatter rights to the land upon which the

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<sup>65</sup>*U. S. Statutes at Large*, XIV, 93.

<sup>66</sup>Post Returns, Fort Kearny, August, 1867.

<sup>67</sup>Old Files Division, Adjutant General's Office.

fort had been located. He removed his family there from Illinois and built his house on the old parade ground.

Numerous attempts were made to secure Congressional assent to the disposition of the 65,000 acre reservation as a whole. Some attempts were made to have it ceded to the State of Nebraska for use as a state institution, but these were unsuccessful. It was even proposed by Moses Sydenham and others to remove the national capital to the reservation and to name the new city thus to be created New Washington. This plan was not favored in the East, and never recieved serious consideration by Congress.

In 1876 an act was approved transferring the reservation to the Department of the Interior for settlement under the homestead law. The land was resurveyed and opened to entry the following year. Mr. Dungan filed on the quarter upon which the fort had been located. By applying time spent in the army during the war he was able to prove up his entry in less than the usual five year period and to receive a patent from the government conveying title to the site of the old fort.<sup>68</sup>

The tract remained in Mr. Dungan's possession until his death in 1922. A short time prior to this, historically minded persons undertook to secure the site of old Fort Kearny as a state park. Mr. Dungan's demise threw his estate into litigation. Further efforts were held in abeyance until legal matters could be adjusted. When it was apparent that the land would be sold at a referee's sale interest was again aroused and steps taken to purchase the site for park purposes.

With the organization of the Fort Kearny Memorial Association in 1928, the prospect of creating the state memorial park became more real. Efforts were at once begun to procure the necessary funds for carrying out this pupose. The money was subscribed largely by the citizens living in the vicinity of the old fort, and the forty

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<sup>68</sup>Application No. 4435, Certified Photostat, Commissioner, General Land Office, Washington.

acres upon which the buildings of the post stood, was purchased.

Title to the tract for use as a state park was tendered to the State of Nebraska by the Association. On March 26, 1929, an act was approved by the State Legislature accepting the tender and creating therefrom a "State Historical and Scenic Park and Bird Reserve."<sup>69</sup> The following December Governor Arthur J. Weaver personally visited the park and accepted officially the deed to the site of the old Fort Kearny.

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<sup>69</sup>*Session Laws, Legislature of Nebraska, 45th Session (1929)*, pp. 448-450.