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Article Summary: James Kennerly, sutler at Fort Atkinson from 1823 to 1826, recorded both commonplace occurrences and garrison orders in his diary. According to his notes, soldiers at the fort spent most of their time farming and raising livestock. Their diversions included a library, horse racing, and consumption of large quantities of whiskey.

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Life at Fort Atkinson¹

By Edgar Bruce Wesley

FIFTEEN miles north of Omaha is the pleasant little town of Fort Calhoun. One half mile east of the town there is a high bluff by whose base the muddy Missouri once flowed. The former bed is now overgrown with trees and bushes, while the restless river has found a new course, miles to the eastward. On this lonely bluff once stood the largest fort with the strongest garrison of any establishment of that period in the United States. Here, then, was the scene of a military community whose life we shall try to visualize.

The way in which this community came into existence is of interest. One hundred and thirteen years ago Congress was trying to balance the budget. The high tariff of 1816 had cut down imports and consequently revenues. Casting about for items on which to wield the axe, some Congressmen attacked the appropriations proposed for the War Department. They succeeded in reducing the military appropriations, and so forced Secretary of War John C. Calhoun to curtail suddenly a plan he had initiated and in part already executed for the building of posts at the mouth of the Yellowstone and the Minnesota. The expedition which was on its way to the Yellowstone was forced to remain at Council Bluffs. Thus the economy of Congress led to the growth and development of the first fort, and in fact the first considerable settlement, within the limits of the present state of Nebraska, namely, Fort Atkinson.

¹This paper, read at the 25th annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, held at Lincoln, April 28-30, 1932, is based primarily upon Edgar B. Wesley, ed., "Diary of James Kennerly," *Missouri Historical Collections*, VI, 41-97. Other sources are: Inspection Reports, 1814-1823, Inspector General's Office; *St. Louis Enquirer*; and *American State Papers: Military Affairs*.

The post, first called Camp Missouri, had its beginnings in September, 1819, when Colonel Henry Atkinson with 1,120 soldiers established their quarters in the river bottom in the region then generally known as Council Bluffs. Because of the poor health of the troops, the camp was moved in the following summer onto the bluffs two miles southward. This second establishment was called Camp Council Bluffs, but in conformity with Secretary Calhoun's explicit order, the name was changed in 1821 to Fort Atkinson. The post was occupied from 1819 to 1827 and was garrisoned by an unusually large body of troops for that day, numbering respectively for each of the years indicated 1,120, 851, 548, 447, 497, 423, 694, 472, and 490. During this period the post was in turn under the command of Atkinson, Col. Henry Leavenworth, Willoughby Morgan, and Abraham Woolley.

There are numerous scattered references and three principal sources of information about this post. First and most extensive of the principal sources are the records of the Sixth Regiment of Infantry, which were copied by A. E. Sheldon and are preserved in the library of the Nebraska Historical Society. The second source consists of inspection reports, general orders, and various other data found in the War Department at Washington. The third principal source, which is the briefest but in many ways the most illuminating, is the diary of James Kennerly, who was the sutler at Fort Atkinson from 1823 to 1826.

The sutler was a civilian attached to the post and given the rank of cadet with no duties attached. He conducted a store in a building provided by the government and enjoyed the exclusive privilege of selling goods to the soldiers. From him they purchased the odds and ends which no commissary could provide—notions, ornaments, clothing, refreshments, tobacco, and extra whiskey. The sutler was to a frontier garrison what the general merchant is to an isolated community. In return for his privileges and monopoly, he paid ten cents a month for each soldier at the post. This sum went into the post fund from which books, news-

papers, band instruments, pensions, and other incidental expenses were paid. The Council of Administration, appointed by the commanding officer, regulated prices and kept the sutler from profiteering.

The first sutler at Fort Atkinson was John O'Fallon, who remained only a short time. In 1823 he was followed by James Kennerly, a brother-in-law of William Clark. Kennerly's household consisted of a wife, two small children, two negro boys, a negro woman, and, at frequent intervals, two brothers-in-law. His store, consisting of two rooms, was well stocked with goods, valued in 1826 at \$20,000. He maintained a billiard table which was cared for by a rustler, who received \$10 a month. The sutler eventually succeeded in erecting a two-story dwelling house, equipped with a chimney which, in spite of repeated reconstructions, refused to draw. Fortunately for us, Kennerly kept a diary. It is for the most part a record of commonplace occurrences: the dates of his orders, the numerous quarrels with the Council of Administration over prices, the requests which he made in connection with the building of his house, his attempts to make the chimney draw, and the arrival and departure of boats and expresses. In addition to these major interests, he recorded numerous items of social and economic interest, and from his unimaginative pages one can secure reliable data on conditions at this busy frontier post.

The post which Kennerly served was extensive. To construct an accurate picture of it is difficult because no maps of the whole post are available. Yet, though we do not know the exact arrangement, we do know the details of what was there. The main buildings were set along the lines of a large rectangle. They consisted of the barracks, magazine, mess halls, the hospital, and probably one of the two commissary stores. All of these buildings either joined each other or were connected by gates which closed the rectangle. Just outside the fort were the stockade, the Indian Council house, twenty by fifty-six feet, and one and a half stories high, a large barn thirty by one hundred

twenty feet, and stables for the horses. Between the fort on the bluff and the river below were the blacksmith shop, ice houses, and the other commissary store, which was thirty by sixty feet in size. Near the fort also were the quarters for the laundresses, the sutler's store and two-story dwelling house, and the private dwellings of some of the officers. Scattered over the nearby grounds were the brick kiln, the bake house, and the dairy. Up the river at a distance were the farm house, the saw mill with a daily capacity of 1,500 feet, and the grist mill with a daily capacity of 150 bushels.

The barracks were of logs and had a total of eighty-eight rooms, each of which had a window with panes of glass. The roofs were of shingles, and the inside walls were frequently white washed. The houses were large, and after the erection of the saw mill they were usually constructed of planks. Most of the buildings had fireplaces; a few of them contained stoves.

The total population of this fort was probably about one thousand. Many persons other than soldiers were found there. Most of the officers and several of the privates were married; consequently the number of women was considerable. Children were numerous enough to warrant the formation of a school. In addition there were a number of laundresses who received rations, including the whiskey. There was also a considerable number of workmen, including carpenters, masons, tailors, shoemakers, and other skilled workmen. Several traders, in spite of the sutler's monopoly, did a flourishing business just beyond the limits of the post reservation. Fur traders, travelers, Indian agents, and visitors frequented the cantonment. The soldiers, however, formed the main element, and their activities merit our attention.

One might naively suppose that the chief business of the soldiers at Fort Atkinson was the protection of the frontier. Their warlike dispositions can be imagined from reading a garrison order which stated that two soldiers were robbed of their ammunition by the Indians. The or-

der commented upon the "shameful and disgraceful indignity" and specified that soldiers who loaned or sold their arms or allowed them to be taken would thereafter be compelled to go out of the fort unarmed. The chief business of the soldiers at Fort Atkinson was not the protection of the frontier; it was farming.

At the end of the first season the soldiers gathered 8,839 bushels of corn, 2,213 bushels of potatoes, 496 bushels of turnips, and many other kinds of crops. In 1821 the corn crop amounted to 26,400 bushels, and comparable crops were raised each year until 1826. The hay crop of 1822 amounted to 250 tons. The main farm, consisting of bottom land, contained 504 acres. In addition, each of the ten companies was assigned, in some years five- and in other years fourteen-acre tracts for gardens; a similar area was cultivated for the staff officers. Turnips, carrots, parsnips, onions, cabbage, beets, radishes, and other vegetables were raised under the direction of a man who devoted all his time to the task. Not content with these operations, Colonel Leavenworth and the sutler formed a partnership to do some extra farming. One officer was made Superintendent and Director of Agriculture, and another was made Superintendent of Stock. Garrison orders show that drilling was compulsory unless other duties interfered. In June, 1821, farm work was so urgent that all drilling was suspended, and a detail was set to work on Sunday. In one year there was no drilling whatever from September to December. Farming came first. In fact it became so extensive and so absorbing that the military duties became distinctly secondary. At length General Atkinson and the inspector recalled the original purpose of the establishment, and in October, 1826, Inspector George Croghan denounced the agricultural practice most vehemently. After visiting Fort Atkinson, he reported that it was the weakest fort with the most helpless and untrained garrison that he had ever seen. Quoting Croghan: "Our military have lost character among the Indians. No officer seems to know his place in case of an alarm. Order a shell to be thrown and

the time necessary for firing three or more will be taken up in finding one small enough for the bore. The men say there is no danger—well then as well argue that there should be no army and I would as soon argue there be none. The present system is destroying military spirit and making officers the base overseers of a troop of awkward ploughmen. Let the soldier be one. Let him no longer boast of his skill as a tiller of the soil, but as a soldier. They can raise gardens, but do not let them boast of proficiency as farmers, of the advantages of the broadcast over the drill, nor of the extra five bushels of corn per acre raised by Company C over Company B from relying more upon the plough than upon the hoe. Look at Ft. Atkinson and you will see barnyards that would not disgrace a Pennsylvania farmer, herds of cattle that would do credit to a Potomac grazier, yet where is the gain in this, either to the soldier or to the Government? Why all the corn and hay? To feed to cattle. Why the cattle? To eat the corn and hay."

Closely associated with farming was the raising of stock. Great numbers of horses and mules, and at least 60 oxen were used in farming. There were also many privately owned horses which were not maintained at government expense. Beef cattle and milk cows supplied meat and milk. A census of 1823 showed the number of cattle, exclusive of work oxen, to be 382. Hogs were numerous and their lack of respect for gardens furnished the occasion for frequent garrison orders and occasional courts martial. The number of hogs can be inferred from an order sent to Franklin, Missouri, for 230 empty pork barrels. No soldier was permitted to allow his hogs to run over the fields; he might, however, raise one or two provided he kept them in a pen. In addition to the live stock, the garrison owned a number of chickens. Apparently about every officer and man owned a dog; a garrison order refers to "the extraordinary accumulation of dogs" as an "intolerable nuisance."

The extensive farming and the variety of live stock indicate some of the varied menus which the soldiers enjoyed.

After the first year fresh beef seemed to have been frequently on the fare, as many as eighteen cattle being killed at one time. Frequent mention is made of butter, sausage, bacon, cheese, lard, dried fruit, sugar, molasses, tea, coffee, pepper, spice, vinegar, salt, and eggs, and occasionally apples, plum preserves, and wild honey are mentioned. The sutler and the officers occasionally had turkey, fish, venison, olives, geese, and on one occasion "10 Buffalow Tongues of good quality."

After the first trying winter in the river bottom, during which about one hundred soldiers died, the health of the troops was excellent. The necessity of sanitation was clearly recognized; drain trenches were carefully maintained, and rigid inspection and supervision insured obedience to sanitary regulations. One garrison order provided that the beds be aired on Saturdays, and another specified that the hog pens were to be removed to a distance of 120 yards from the cantonment. In order to prevent the rise of dust, no horses or other animals were allowed within the fort. When sickness did occur, the favorite remedies were Peruvian bark, blistering plasters, and whiskey, and the sutler had great faith in calomel.

The soldier's life at Fort Atkinson was, then, as hard as the farmer's life everywhere, but it was scarcely monotonous. During the course of a year he was likely to be assigned to a variety of tasks: farming, gardening, cooking, making bricks, burning lime in the quarry at Fort Lisa, cutting and storing ice, running the saw or grist mill, cutting wood, hunting game, shooting wolves, building a house, milking cows, clearing the grounds, and going on a trip for supplies. These activities were interspersed with at least occasional drills and enforced attention to orations on February 22 and July 4.

These duties, however, by no means exhausted the energies of the soldiers. They were continually engaging in amusements, some of which led to courts martial. Horse racing was popular, and the owner of the winner received considerable sums. One private was ordered to bring in the

cows; instead, he went to the horse races. He paid for his pleasure with a term in the guard house. Cards was an absorbing game among the privates, who, in spite of regulations, placed money upon the game. Hunting wolves, geese, rabbits, and buffaloes was a favorite pastime; in fact, the soldiers were so successful that the Indians protested that they were starved on account of the scarcity of game. Another amusement was Kennerly's billiard table. But whiskey provided strong competition to all these pastimes and amusements.

Whiskey was perhaps the most frequently mentioned topic in garrison orders. At one time the commissary had 9,000 gallons, and a liberal supply was regularly furnished every soldier. Extra work was rewarded by a larger allowance. In addition to the official allowance, the sutler sold enormous quantities and the laundresses became bootleggers when garrison orders prevented the sutler from supplying the demands directly. From these sources the soldiers secured enough whiskey to become drunk altogether too frequently to accord with the commanding officer's standards. Numerous orders concerning its sale and consumption were issued. In one of them Leavenworth said "The men are carousing and getting drunk about every night." Following one pay day 136 persons were court martialed, 38 of them for drunkenness. Private Josiah Elkins drew twenty-four gills of whiskey for a wood chopping party of six and kept it all for himself. The sutler records on a certain day that all his men were drunk except Foote and Rider. The hope that these two were teetotalers is blasted by a careful examination of the company records, which show that Rider was at one time confined in the guard house for drunkenness. One can only surmise as to why he was sober on this particular day. The sutler found that whiskey could be exchanged for a choice fish and two gallons of it would induce men to plant a whole field of corn. One can only speculate as to the repercussions signified by such an entry as this: "Al Saugrain," the sutler's brother-in-law, "intoxicated last night and very troublesome lying in the warehouse all day to day."

The immoderate use of whiskey, although accounting for many trials, was not the sole cause which led to courts martial. Among numerous other offenses may be mentioned fighting, disobedience, desertion, going to sleep on duty, failing to wash dishes, shooting hogs, calves, and cows, playing cards with a negro slave, shooting a wife, whipping a laundress, beating a corporal, breaking windows, emptying ashes in the wrong place, stealing a coat, stealing preserves, hunting on Indian land, selling government clothing, guns, and other articles in order to buy whiskey, failing to protect crops from the live stock, swearing at officers, and "hustle cap," a game of heads or tails.

These offenses were punished in a variety of ways. Some quite familiar penalties were solitary confinement, wearing a ball and chain, fine, reduction to the ranks, police duty, and stoppage of whiskey rations. More ingenious punishments were riding the wooden horse, wearing an iron collar with projecting points, and standing on a block in a conspicuous place wearing a placard inscribed with the words, "I stand for theft" or "I stand for slander." True genius, however, presided in the court when one deserter was ordered to be drummed out of camp with his coat on backwards and with a straw halter about his neck.

It would be a misleading description, however, which would indicate that work, drunkenness, and courts martial consumed the whole attention of the post. There was a social life. Among the officers, sutler, Indian agent, and traders—the group which set the social standards—dinners, dances, and whist parties were popular. Members of this group met frequently and occasionally attended social functions at Cabanne's post at Fort Lisa, a few miles below Fort Atkinson. The ladies, when making such visits to nearby posts, frequently went in carriages or on boats. Balls to which soldiers, laundresses, and laborers, as well as the officers, were invited, were held in the Council House.

The post was not devoid of cultural influences. A library of commendable quality and extent was maintained

out of the post fund. An officer was detailed to serve as librarian, and careful rules were formulated and frequent inspections were made. Even officers were fined for failing to return books on time. In one year the sum of \$500 was appropriated for the purchase of books, newspapers, and magazines. Some of the contents of this library might be of interest. It contained Brackenridge's *View of Louisiana*, Scott's Poems, *Red Gauntlet*, a book on Montesquieu, Gibbon, and Robinson's *History of Scotland*. Among the magazines were *Edinburgh Review*, *Edinburgh Magazine*, *New London Monthly Review*, *North American Review*, *Gentlemen's Magazine*, *American Repository*, *Amateur Magazine*, and an agricultural review. The sutler received a copy of Cooper's *Pilot* and was a subscriber to the *National Intelligencer* and the *St. Louis Republican*. He was the owner of a "musical box" which he valued highly enough to send to St. Louis for repairs.

The post school was opened in February, 1821. The garrison order providing for its teacher is almost as laconic as one of Kennerly's diary entries. "Serg. Mumford has been appointed teacher and will be respected accordingly"; so runs the garrison order. "Respected accordingly" was a commonplace phrase. Any suspicion of it will be allayed when we learn that he was allowed to purchase two gallons of whiskey a month, for if he was not respected, at least he would be envied. According to the inspection reports, the school was a success and the pupils made progress in their studies. Two soldiers who failed to send their children to school were reprimanded.

The library and the school tended to relieve the mental isolation that must otherwise have characterized such a community. In still other ways were these people kept in touch with the main currents of human events. Frequent posts and expresses arrived from St. Louis within twelve to fifteen days. Boats plied the Missouri. Fur traders and trappers came frequently. John E. Wool, Jefferson Davis, W. S. Harney, Albert Sidney Johnston, George Croghan, and W. H. Ashley were some of the better known visitors.

Occasionally a Spaniard put in his appearance, and a Roubidoux set out from Fort Atkinson for what the sutler calls "St. Afee." One party set out in 1820 for the post at the mouth of St. Peters. Instead of being a sleepy, monotonous, isolated community, it was a hive of activity. Instead of being the graveyard of a dead expedition, it was an outpost of a civilization that was soon to follow.