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Article Summary: Stationed for a year in North Platte, Lieutenant Cowles writes home to his father in North Carolina a letter describing his daughter, his garden and the weather at the post. He predicts that the Sioux War will be "the most bloody on record."

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Photographs / Images: Fort McPherson officers' club, store, and post saloon in 1873



Serving as the officers' club, store, and post saloon at Fort McPherson in 1873 was this complex of buildings.

LIEUTENANT C. D. COWLES AT NORTH PLATTE STATION, 1876

Edited by WEYMOUTH T. JORDAN, JR.

C ALVIN DUVAL COWLES was born June 26, 1849, at Elksville, Wilkes County, North Carolina. He spent most of his youth in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, where he attended school and worked in his father's general store. In March, 1868, he matriculated at New Garden Academy (now Guilford College), a Quaker school located in Greensboro; the following year he was appointed to the United States Military Academy. On June 13, 1873, Cowles graduated twenty-fifth in a class of forty one cadets and was commissioned a second lieutenant.

During the course of his forty years of service in the United States Army, Cowles attained the rank of Colonel and took part in the following campaigns and wars: The Northern Cheyenne campaign of 1878, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine Insurrection of 1900-1902, and the Cuban Pacification of 1906-1909. He died at Hartford, Connecticut, June 21, 1937.

Cowles spent the first ten years of his career serving at various frontier posts west of the Mississippi River. From April 3, 1875, until August 24, 1876, he was stationed at North Platte Station, Nebraska, a second lieutenant in the Twenty-third Infantry.

North Platte Station, at one time known officially as Camp Sergeant, was established at the new Union Pacific division point of North Platte

Mr. Jordan is an archivist for the State of North Carolina Department of Archives and History at Raleigh.

on January 30, 1867. It was a sub-post of Fort McPherson, located approximately fifteen miles to the southeast of North Platte on the south side of the Platte River. North Platte Station was established for the protection of the village as well as a distribution point for supplying other military detachments protecting railroad construction farther west. It later served as the distribution center for Fort McPherson. The post was finally abandoned on May 31, 1881, at which time the buildings were sold. As the site of the post had never been owned by the federal government, it reverted to private ownership at that time.

The following letter of Lieutenant Cowles was written at the height of the Sioux campaign of 1876 to his father, Calvin J. Cowles:

North Platte, Neb.
[Wednesday,] Aug. 9, 1876.¹

Dear Pa

I have been intending to answer your letter for some time past but owing to official duties, hot weather and grasshoppers [*sic*] I have not found a convenient occasion till now. It is now 8 P.M. My official cares for the day are over. A delightfully cool evening has succeeded a sultry day—a refreshing shower is pattering on the roof and better still on my garden, and the grasshoppers are at rest. Mary [his wife] is putting Toosie [their one year old daughter] to sleep by singing her (Toosie's) favorite song of the frog that would a wooing go etc. I can remember when Ma used to sing it to me and what a great fellow I thought Mr. Frogie with his sword and pistol by his side etc. So I'm in a very pleasant frame of mind for letter writing and if I was not a very poor letter writer and had anything to write about you would be warrented [*sic*] in anticipating a clever and interesting letter.

You get all the indian news through the papers. We are destined to remain here as lookers on in Venice, I think—which upon the whole is better than furnishing scalps for Sitting Bull. It is the general impression here among soldiers and frontiersmen that Genl S. Bull has from 5 to 10 to [General Alfred H.] Terry and [General George] Crook's one—If it is true, the war will be the most bloody on record—hardly excepting the Modoc [campaign of 1872-73]. I knew at West Point several of the poor fellows that fell with [General George Armstrong] Custar [*sic*].

The drought and grasshoppers have completely ruined all crops in this country. I have been independent of rain as my garden is irrigated by a ditch but the grasshoppers have given me no little trouble the past few days—I have succeeded in out generaling them so far and shall dispute possession of the field in future—I smoke and drive them. My garden is in fine condition and could be surpassed by few, if any, . I have everything that usually grows in a kitchen garden and a few flowers. Mine is the only garden that has survived the grasshoppers—The people are either too ignorant or too lazy to keep them off. I have sold my ponies and drive gov. mules now. If I should have money enough to pay our fare we may be home about the 15, Nov. I am entitled to 3 months leave on full pay—Write soon and give me all the news—what about the mint?² Toosie is very sweet and pretty—Mary & she are well and send love to all in which I join.

your aff son C. D. Cowles

NOTES

1. The original copy of this letter is in the Calvin J. Cowles Papers, North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.
2. The elder Cowles was employed at this time as assayer of the U. S. Mint in Charlotte, North Carolina. As there was currently a movement in Washington to close the Charlotte mint, Lieutenant Cowles' question was presumably in reference to that possibility.