

Fort McPherson, 1870

Fort McPherson's days of glory were in the past as the new year of 1870 arrived. There would be days of excitement and adventure--and some glory--in the future, but there would be little to compare with those first years, from the autumn of 1863 until the early winter of 1869. It was still a frontier post, with all the monotony and trials the term implies, but the region ^{under} its influence was becoming civilized. The Union Pacific Railroad had played its part, running as it did just a few miles north of the fort; the Homestead Act of 1862 was another factor, bringing thousands of homesteaders annually into Nebraska; and the military itself had had its role. The Sioux and Cheyenne, regular inhabitants of the region, were demoralized and slowly being herded onto reservations at distant locations, where they were becoming wards of the Indian Bureau--nagged into degrees of submission by a series of Indian agents of varying degrees of ability. And in the immediate future was the arrival of the professional buffalo hunter, who would soon bring an end to the Indians' four-legged commissary. Fort McPherson would be garrisoned for another ten years, but its role would be deminished year by year.

It had all began in September 1863, when a few troops from Fort Kearny, in central Nebraska, were sent to Cottonwood Springs, a location fifteen-odd miles below the forks of the Platte, where several enterprising men had opened road ranches, since the discovery

of gold in the western part of the Nebraska and Kansas Territories, soon to become the Colorado Territory. Overland travel through the great Platte Valley became year-round, and it was profitable to do business with overland travelers. The distant Civil War had repercussions on the Plains, for the regular army was all but withdrawn from the two ~~forts~~ of the region--Kearny and Laramie, replaced by newly enlisted non-professionals from the States. By the fall of 1863, the heretofore mainly friendly Cheyenne and Sioux were becoming more hostile, as the swell of westward migration of the whites continued, lured on by the hopes of gold and the hopes of evading the eastern military service. Territorial residents could not be drafted into the army, though all the territories did provide companies for duty in the war.

The temporary post established at Cottonwood Springs was first known as Camp McKean, then Post Cottonwood, became Fort Cottonwood, and, finally, on January 20, 1866, it became Fort McPherson. Its troops had taken part in the dreaded warfare of 1864 and 1865, when most of the ranches and stage station between Fort Kearny and Denver were attacked by hostiles, if not destroyed. It then played a major role in the protection of Union Pacific construction crews. Finally, during the summer and fall of 1869, it had served as headquarters for the Republican River Expedition, commanded by General Eugene Asa Carr. This expedition culminated in the battle of Summit Springs, breaking the hold the Cheyenne and Sioux had over the Republican River watershed, which lay south of Fort McPherson. It was the largest and most successful expedition ever to leave the post, and its success

was an important factor in the eventual demise of the fort. Sioux Indians continued to visit the region, but it was a period of uneasy truce between the military and the Indians. When full scale hostilities broke out again, in 1876, Fort McPherson was no longer on the frontier. The battles took place far to the northwest of the old post in Wyoming, Montana and Dakota territories.

But in January 1870, the Fifth Cavalry was still station^{ed} at Fort McPherson, manned by 260 enlisted men and fourteen officers. They did not realize how successful their recent campaign had been. But life at the post was quiet for the troops, compared to their previous winters of hard campaigning on the southern Plains. Diversions were few, but they ~~was~~ did provide some respite, as the post surgeon, A. D. Wilson, noted in his January report:

Several hunting parties consisting of a few officers and enlisted men numbering in all about thirty left the post, at intervals, for the Republican River country, in search of buffalo. They were well provided with rations and in each instance had a number of army wagons accompanying them. They were very successful and returned to the Post well supplied with meat. One of the parties killed in the neighborhood of one hundred buffalo and twenty elk. In consequence of these parties being so successful there was but little beef used at the Post, Buffalo meat constituting almost entirely the principal meat ration of the garrison. /"Post Surgeon's Returns, Fort McPherson", National Archives, microfilm, Nebraska State Historical Society, hereafter cited as "Post Surgeon's Returns".

Though he is not named, it can be assumed that at least part of these expeditions were accompanied by the Fifth Cavalry's main gift to Fort McPherson and Nebraska--William Frederick Cody, or Buffalo Bill, who had come north from Kansas and scouted for the Republican River Expedition. Already becoming well known on the frontier, his early Nebraska years were the period when he became a nationally known figure, and North Platte--in 1870 just a village at the forks of the Platte--was to be his home for many years, the spot to which he returned after his worldly travels.

Frontier military posts were dependent upon at least some civilian labor, and this help usually included at least one local frontier figure of some legendary import. Fort McPherson seemed to have attracted more than its share. As well as Buffalo Bill, there were John Burwell (Texas Jack) Omohundro, Leon Francois (The Wolf) Pallardie, Charles (Dashing Charlie) Emmett, Edward (Iron Legs) Morin, William Frank (Doc) Carver, and David Franklin (White Beaver) Powell, most of whom became the hero of at least one dime novel. And there were others, with their own small claims to fame, who were familiars of the fort--all authentic frontier characters.

Buffalo Bill quickly became the most legendary of them all, based upon a reputation that was well earned. Others had adventures equally exciting, but it was Cody who stood center stage, and he held it for the rest of his life, long after he had left the West. Though he had played an important role in the Republican River Expedition and the Battle of Summit Springs--historians continue to debate his actual role in the battle--he apparently received little newspaper

publicity, though his reputation was becoming known. One of the first Nebraska newspaper accounts mentioning him was not ~~fairly~~ flattering:

BUFFALO BILL SHOT AND KILLED AT M'PHERSON.

This man, who has of late been so much talked about in the papers, has been known for years on the plains as a guide and scout of acknowledged ability, but of ~~his~~ late his dissipation and natural depravity has turned him into a desperado. Last Thursday morning he went into the eating house at North Platte, flourishing a large revolver, and called for his breakfast, and when it was served he amused himself with buttering his cakes and throwing them against the wall. He was then drunk, and ~~been~~ on a spree several days. On getting on board the cars he flourished his revolver, frightening the passengers, and finally breaking one of the windows of the car with it. His next move was into the baggage car, where he struck the newsboy with his revolver, and received a powerful blow in return from a Californian. He then retreated from that car, and meeting one of the colored porters, hit him a blow with his pistol, knocking him senseless and cutting a deep gash in his head. But this class of men finally meet with their fate, in almost every case with their boots on, and yesterday we learned from O. W. Cady, the newsboy who came in on the train, that "Buffalo Bill's" wild career had come to a violent end, and that he had been shot and killed at McPherson. /Omaha Weekly Herald, Wednesday, 16 February 1870, reprinted from the Daily Herald

of the previous day (no copy extant).

This letter was apparently retracted in the Omaha Daily Herald of February 18th, though it was not republished in the Weekly Herald, and, unfortunately, no Daily Heralds exist for 1870. We know of the retraction through the following letter, published in the Weekly Herald of Wednesday, March 9th:

"BUFFALO BILL"

Interesting Letter on Mr. Cody from E.Z.C. Judson,
"Ned Buntline."

NEW YORK, /Thursday, / Feb. 24, 1870.

To the Editor of the HERALD.

Never was I more gratified than to see in your paper of the 18th the noble "rush" of friends to the rescue of the reputation of my dear and brave friend, "Buffalo Bill," or William Cody. Such men as he are scarce in this world; would they were more plentiful on your western Corner and all over the Union. Your promptness, and the generous use of so much of your paper to refute the erroneous statement of the 15th. is nobly creditable to yourself and publishers.

I am about to "write up" another scout near you--Mr. Wentworth--and you will ever find that in all my stories in the New York Weekly, I only take true men for my heroes.

In haste, yours ever,

E. Z. C. JUDSON,
"Ned Buntline."

{Omaha Weekly Herald, Wednesday, 9 March 1870./

Exactly when Cody met Judson is not exactly known, but it was either during or after the Republican River Expedition. The writer

had then returned East and written a serial story entitled, "Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men", though it actually dealt with purported adventures of Wild Bill Hickock during the Civil War! /Don Russell, The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 159-61; hereafter cited as Russell, Buffalo Bill. The "Mr. Wentworth" Judson mentions as his next hero was Conrad (Little Buckskin) Wentworth of the Loup country, later active around Fort Hartsuff as a scout. At least one dime novel was written [REDACTED] about him, though it was not written by Judson. It might also be noted that the Omaha Herald became Nody's staunchest backer among Nebraska newspapers, throughout the following years, perhaps because of their early erroneous account.

In the same weekly issue of the Herald as the Judson letter was a letter from Cottonwood Springs, which deals not with the arrival of a legendary western figure--though Cody is mentioned in passing, but with the new advances in the neighborhood, designed to change the face of the Plains:

COTTONWOOD SPRINGS, Neb.,
/Tuesday, / March 1st, 1870.

[REDACTED] To the Editor of the Herald:

Let the enemies of home enterprise stand from under.
Last evening a large and [REDACTED] enthusiastic meeting of citizens, soldiers and officers met at the large and commodious store of John Burke, for the purpose of celebrating the completion of the two bridges across the two Platte rivers, at a point four miles west of Fort McPherson, in Lincoln county, Neb. /Actually he is referring to two channels of the Platte River, which divided around an island, not to the two forks

of the Platte River further west, near North Platte./
The last spike was driven by John Rice, at 4 o'clock P. M. yesterday; the stringers laid across the span, and tiles, brush, hay and sod were, by an extra force, quickly placed on the unfinished span of the South Platte, completing 700 yards of bridge on the South Platte, and 430 yards of bridge on the North Platte river, at this point.

The distance between the two rivers is about 1½ miles, and now the bridge being finished in a good, substantial manner, built of piles driven from 10 to 13 feet in the river bottom, with heavy timber for stringers, making an easy and substantial highway between Fort McPherson and the Union Pacific railroad.

This gigantic enterprise was originated by John Burke, and yesterday completed after nearly a year's labor, by his individual energy and money. Resolutions were offered by the citizens and unanimously adopted, thanking John Burke for his perseverance and sacrifices in prosecuting this work to completion. Without this bridge there would be but little hopes of the rich and fertile soil south of the South Platte river being cultivated. Now, the emigrant can take his section of land and have egress to the railroad a market for all products.

The County Commissioners of Lincoln county have ordered an election to submit to a vote of the people, on the 7th day of March, whether the county shall issue \$30,000 in 10-year

bonds for the purpose of building a bridge across the South Platte at North Platte City.

If John Burke can bridge the two Plattes with the hope of making it a toll bridge, can not a few men of North Platte bridge one river and obtain a charter, and charge toll? If it will pay, that would be a good investment; if it does not, the county ought not to issue her bonds to build this bridge. If the county does ^{not} bridge the South Platte, parties will have to travel east 12 miles to cross the North Platte on John Burke's bridge.

The people of Cottonwood have no desire to discourage the people in their endeavors to build a bridge at North Platte, for the purpose of accomodating the heavy immigration expected this spring, opening up to settlement the richest portion of the State of Nebraska. South of Fort McPherson 24 miles we reach a flat prairie country beyond what is called the "Divide" between the Republican and Platte river. Crossing this divide is made easy by bridges and roads made there by John Burke for ~~the~~ the purpose of getting wood. This "divide" will furnish wood for the settlers in the valley of the Platte. /The writer ~~is~~ is someone confused as "the Divide" is the ^{flat} high, land between the ~~valley~~ valley^s of the Platte and the Republican. The timber grew, not on the Divide, but in the canyons which split the flat land./

The soil is said to be in the Republican valley equal to the soil in richness and productiveness, to that of Eastern

Nebraska. The reason that this rich country between the two rivers, is not settled, is the fear of Indians. Emigrants can rest assured that during the coming summer, with General Emory at McPherson with a regiment of soldiers, and a station on the Republican, they will be safe from raids from Indians. Mr. Burke has, for the last three years, furnished the Union Pacific Railroad and the United States Government wood on an average of one thousand cords per month, and asserts that there is plenty more wood. For years the settler can be furnished with wood from the ravines and cliffs of the divide.

During the past winter the soldiers here have furnished themselves with Buffalo meat, cutting down the profits of the Government beef contractor. Daniel Burke, with two men, in the Republican valley, on a four day hunt, brought home 4,000 pounds of Buffalo and elk meat, last week. It is said that Daniel equals the celebrated "Buffalo Bill" on a hunt.

Few people are aware of the beauty of the country lying between Fort McPherson and McPherson station on the U. P. Railroad, a distance of six miles. Between the two Plattes is what is called "Brady Island," reaching from a point ten miles east of this place west to a point three miles east of North Platte, where the South Platte, by a small channel, cuts the surface soil in ~~to~~ high water to the North Platte, making the island about 22 miles long. This island, varying in width from one half to one mile, has neighbors, varying in size from a

half acre to four acres, little islands called by the early settlers "Toe heads." On these toe heads are large cottonwood trees, which now the latent energies nature helping them, are budding to be nipped by a late March frost.

Deer, jack-rabbits and occasionally a turkey visit these toe heads. The river flats proper are fertile, and have and will produce vegetables. Four years ago I saw myself planted and gathered, after ripening to eat, pumpkins, cucumbers, beets, radishes, lettuce, etc., at a point two miles west of Mr. Burke's ranch.

This year will demonstrate whether Lincoln county can support an agricultural population. It is asserted by such men as Chas. McDonald, J. P. Boyer, and Edward Morin, all old settlers, that the soil will produce all kinds of vegetables and the hardier kinds of cereals.

Therefore it is that we invite the landless portion of the eastern population to come to middle Nebraska and take, under the Homestead or Pre-emption laws, his quarter section, and cultivate the same, enriching himself and the country thereby.

B. B. B.

/Omaha Weekly Herald, Wednesday, 9 March 1870.

Though the writer had rather doubtful knowledge of local geography, as well as an interesting approach to grammar, he gives an interesting picture of civilian attitudes in the vicinity of Fort McPherson. Though well intentioned, the belief that the homesteaders were due to arrive in great numbers was inaccurate--at least for the time being. Lincoln County was still a part of the Nebraska frontier.

Life at Fort McPherson remained calm through the early months of the year, with no expeditions leaving the fort. For February, Dr. Wilson reported, among other things, that:

The discipline of the troops at the Post is exceptionally good, they are drilled twice daily, ~~on~~ mounted in the forenoon, and on foot in the afternoon. The Sunday morning inspections are usually conducted on foot. A mounted inspection of the entire command is usually held every Wednesday morning, (the weather permitting) At all of these inspections the troops are exercised in evolutions. Their maneuvers are exceedingly well performed. /"Post Surgeon's Returns", February 1870./

At the end of April, Wilson reported:

Drunkenness, But very little drunkenness exists among the troops at the post. Drunken men are very rarely seen between pay days but on pay day it exists to a greater or less extent. On these occasions there are some men who become beastly intoxicated and behave themselves in a very disrespectable manner, but the percentage of such characters is very small. The general deportment of the men in regards to drunkenness will compare favorably with any troops in the service. /Ibid., April 1870./

In May one expedition left the post on a short expedition, but no Indians were seen in the area, though there had been some Indian hostilities at the eastern edge of the Republican valley, far to the southeast of Fort McPherson.

The first week of June ended on a note of excitement, however, which the following letter details:

FORT McPHERSON, NEB.,
/Wednesday, / June 8, 1870.

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To the Editor of the HERALD:
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One Tuesday morning (it is thought) at about three o'clock, a party of Indians came within one mile and a half of this Post and stole twenty-one head of horses and mules, the most of them belonging to Mr. J/ohn/. N. Waite, the beef contractor. The stock was picketed within two hundred yards of Mr. Waite's house, but no one knew Indians were about until six o'clock, when Mr. W. missed his stock. He immediately sent word to the Commander of the Post of the state of things, and Co. I, was ordered out without a single ration, intending to return the same evening. At about 4 P. M. Lieutenant E/arl/. D/enison/. Thomas who commanded the company sent back word that he would follow the Indians four days but he would overtake them. He led his company until it became too dark to keep the trail, and was compelled to camp, but at daybreak was again in pursuit. After about two hour's travel they came on the Indian camp.

The red-skins were so surprised that they were totally unable to give fight, but ran in every direction looking for some place to secrete themselves. The military succeeded in capturing thirty-three head of horses and mules, and killing three Indians. They were making a very

good effort to escape, and I think would have succeeded had there been any other men in pursuit; but with W. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) on the trail, with Lieut. E. D. Thomas and his Company to back him, you can depend on hearing of some good work being done. Lieut. Thomas, I am sure, means "business" when put in pursuit of Indians. The "reds" numbered, as near as can be ascertained, between thirty and forty. Had the troops and their horses not have been so exhausted, it would have been no trouble for them to have pursued the Indians and killed every one of them, and captured all their stock. But neither the men or horses had had anything to eat for over twenty-four hours, and, of course, were compelled to give it up, returning here about 7 o'clock this evening.

The Indians are thought to be Sioux and Cheyenne. I wonder if the Great Red Cloud knows of these things. I firmly believe that were an expedition started out south they would find five hundred of the red skins, if not more, within ten day's march after leaving the post, and, unless something is done, they will, I am satisfied, let us hear from them again. By the way, I think that this is the first instance where a party of Indians made a raid on stock in this vicinity, and failed to get away with what they came after. A great deal of credit is due Lieut. Thomas, Mr. Cody (our most valuable scout) and J. N. Waite.

M. D.

/Omaha Weekly Herald, Wednesday 15 June 1870./

Post Surgeon Wilson also gave a short account of the fight in his monthly return, quoting from General Order No.7, of General Carr, as commander of the post and military district:

At eight o'clock on the morning of the 7th of June, 1870, Lieut. E. D. Thomas was directed to proceed with Co. "I", 5th U.S. Cav. in pursuit of thieves who were reported to have stolen some stock with a mile of Fort McPherson. The pursuit was kept up until 5 A.M. on the following day, when the thieves were found to be Indians, camped on Red Willow Creek. The whole command rushed across the stream, which owing to the many swamps on each side was a difficult and hazardous undertaking, worthy of the highest commendation. Thirty three animals together with the camp equipage was captured.

Lieut. Thomas especially commends Scout Cody for the manner in which he followed the trail particularly at night during a storm of rain and for gallant conduct on the field. /"Surgeon's Post Returns", June 1870./

Cody was later to write of this expedition, confusing a number of individuals, ~~including the post commander~~ and taking credit for having discovered the Indians just as they and the stolen stock disappeared into the bluffs south of the fort. This was Lieutenant Thomas's first expedition, at least the first he lead, and his giving credit to Cody is not common in the reports of the post. /Russell, Buffalo B. 11, 162-64./

The following week a party of 150 Indians crossed the Union Pacific, heading south, in the vicinity of Ogallala. They were pursued by troops in the area, and, after a thirty mile chase, the

Indians abandoned their pack horses and most of the camp equipage was captured and destroyed. /Surgeon's Post Returns," June 1870./

Though on the frontier, Fort McPherson was not beyond the reach of the federal buracracy, for toward the middle of July the census enumerator arrived at the post. Moses H. Sydenham was an old frontiersman, having first served as a civilian employe at Fort Kearny and later operated a road ranche between there and Plum Creek. A native of England, Sydenham wrote a number of articles on life in the West. His most notorious enterprise was his plan to have the federal government abandon Washington, D.C., and move to the Fort Kearny military reservation, when that post was closed by the War Department. Sydenham apparently broke his leg soon after his arrival, and so he was unable to complete his duties until August. While recuperating, he wrote the following long letter, which is quoted in full, as it gives a good description of the fort, the vicinity, the people and recent activities:

FORT McPHERSON, NEB.,
/Monday,/ July 25, '70.

EDITOR OMAHA REPUBLICAN:--Dear Sir:

While ~~lying~~ in bed with my fractured leg, I find I can freely use a pen, so I have concluded to pen you a few lines from this interesting place. There is hardly a Nebraskian that reads a paper, but knows something more more or less about Cottonwood Springs and the United States Military Post, Fort McPherson, loated in the vicinity.

The Springs themselves come out of the hills and form creeks, winding along through the valley here for some distance. /Sydenham is here mistaken. Though their are springfed streams in the vicinity, the location was

named for a specific spring near which the original road ranche was built, not one in the hills./ Clumps of Cottonwood trees occasionally peering up into the Platte Valley to the gaze of the weary traveler as he approaches them on a sultry summer day; while for miles along the Platte river on the islands of the Platte, may be seen groves of trees and scattering tall cottonwoods just as far as the eyes can perceive. Here, too, over the abrupt and mountain looking hills toward the Republican river are those noted canyons full of that useful timber--the Nebraska Red Cedar--that has furnished house logs for buildings as far east as Fort Kearney; house logs to build up all of Fort McPherson, and furnish timber for the same, as well as thousands of ~~kh~~ railroad ties and thousands of cords of wood for the use of the Railroad Company, and for the use of the military post here, as well as of all the settlers in the vicinity; and we presume to say there is cedar enough in those canyons yet to supply settlers here for generations to come. So much for timberless Nebraska. /Sydenham is here carried away; by this time most of the cedar had been cleared, in the ways he described, and very little of it remains today./

Fort McPherson was originally built up here by the First Nebraska /sic/ and Seventh Iowa Cavalry, soon after the breaking out of the Indian war in 1864. Gen. /George M./ O'Brien, of your city, then of the 7th Iowa Cavalry and commander here, taking a prominent part in its improvements. More recently the United States troops have enlarged it, erected fine buildings for the comfort and convenience of

officers and men, and made it in all respects a first-class ~~first-class~~ military post. It is situated at a point where the bluffs of the Platte Valley come very close to the bank of the river on the south side of the valley, and was in ~~the~~ past time a great rendezvous for the Sioux, a few of them occasionally paying a visit to the locality even at the present time, as recent occurrences go to prove. At the present time the post is commanded by Bvt. Major-General Wm. H. Emory, Col. of the 5th United States cavalry, the headquarters of that regiment being at the post. The other officers of the post are Bvt. Major-General Eugene A. Carr, the Indian chastiser; Wm. C. Forbush, post adjutant and regimental adjutant. 1st Lieutenant Edward M. Hays, post and regimental quartermaster. 1st Lieutenant Jacob Almy, post and regimental commissary. Capt. Edward H. Leib, commander company M, 5th cavalry. 2d Lieutenant W. H. Volkmer, company N, 5th cavalry. Capt. H. D. Wilson, post surgeon. Rev. A. A. Rees, post chaplain.

Lieut. /Charles Henry?/ Leonard, of the 18th Infantry, is at present here. He was enroute east from Fort Fred Steele, Wyoming, but was taken sick on the way and is here for treatment.

Here we find our old friend, Mr. John Ford, telegraph operator. Mr. Ford was telegraph operator at Fort Kearney some years past. He has been here ever since, and is now married and comfortably settled.

The leading citizens connected with the post besides are John Clements, chief corral master; George Vahs and John Pannel, assistant wagonmasters; Wm. Cody (Buffalo Bill) scout; Leon Polard /sic, Pallardie/, interpreter; Messrs. /Louis/ Woodie /sic, Worden/ & /Jacob/ Snell, post traders; Messrs. Charles McDonald and S. B. /sic, Isadore/ Boyer, storekeepers, &c.; Ike Burke, contractor, freighter and storekeeper; Wm. Burke built a substantial bridge here which is quite a convenience to the Fort and settlement. In mentioning the affairs of this post I omitted Brevet Capt. P. P. Barnard, of company H, 5th cavalry, who is in charge of the post, garden and farm. Companies I, L, H and F, 5th Cavalry, are at present off on summer service, guarding the line of railraod, &c.

Company I is at present on duty escorting a party of Yale College students and a professor /Othniel Charles Marsh/ of Yale College on a tour of exploration and observation to the bad lands north of the Niobrarah river. Company L is stationed at Lodge Pole Station. Company H at O'Fallons Station, and company F at Plum Creek Station, on the line of the U.P.R.R.

About twelve Yale College students with Professor Marsh have gone out on that exploring business. The result of their observation, I trust, will be interesting to scientific men and the public generally. Though the lands are termed "bad lands," I think they will prove not to be entirely worthless. I will anxiously look for the report of these

these gentlemen. They have with them an escort of brave troops. Company I, of the 5th cavalry, commanded by 1st Lieut. Barnard Riley. Lieut. Earl D. Thomas is the officer second in command, and is the same brave and dashing young officer who recently went on a scout after some Indians, traveling sixty miles and back, killing several Indians, capturing all their property together with the property they had stolen--doing it all before breakfast. As far as safety is concerned, Professor Marsh and the students are in good hands.

Parties of Indians still come around in the vicinity of the Fort. About a week or more ago several young men went out from here over to Buffalo creek, a few miles north of the Platte river at this point, for the purpose of hunting game. They were not thinking much about Indians, so scattered out on their hunting business. There were about four or five in all. While in their scattered condition they were surprised by about a dozen Indians, who got the hunters well separated and then chased them. Some of the hunters either were not seen, or the speed of their horses carried them safely in. One young man, John Weister, whose horse was not very fast, had to stand the brunt of the fight. The Indians closed in on him, and would have had him had he not been a determined boy. The Indians seeing he was well armed, kept at a respectful distance; but one young Indian, braver than the rest, came up close, and fired several shots from his pistol at him, one of the shots taking effect in Weisters

arm, making a severe flesh wound. Initiated by his wound, and finding the enemy so close on him, he halted and commenced fight.--The Indian who shot him had mistook his man, for about the first shot from Weister's rifle sent the Indian rolling on the prairie. The other Indians seeing the fate of this one, turned back, and Weister had an opportunity to get away. His wound is not healed yet. /Cody later wrote he was a member of this party, but said they made a stand against the Indians until Weister was wounded, at which time they were "forced to make a run for our lives." Russell, Buffalo Bill, 167. In the census, the "boy" Weister, is enumerated as a "billiard saloon tender," 23, born in Pennsylvania. 1870 Census: Nebraska. "Lincoln County: Cottonwodd Springs", 2./

Since I was here two years ago, the Fort has improved somewhat. The front of the officers quarters is now laid off in neat gardens and pretty fences enclose them. Trees and flowers planted form quite a contrast to buffalo grass soil surrounding them. The officers have a new club room where they meet to play billiards and otherwise enjoy themselves.

Chas. McDonald is planting trees, fencing, and otherwise improving his place of business and residence. Messrs. Woodler /sic, Worden/, A. D. /sic, Jacob/ Snell and I. P. Boyer, are improving also. Altogether this bids fair to be a prosperous settlment of agriculturalists and stock raisers. Already horses, cattle and sheep, decorate the hills and plains, and fine vegetables from the cultivated soil, garnish the tables of the mess rooms at the Fort. Where thousands

of tons of hay can be cut, and cattle thrive and fatten on the natural grasses the year round, there is no barren land.

Nebraska, 300 miles west of Omaha, is certainly a good productive soil. /Omaha Weekly Republican, Wednesday, 17 August 1870./ Sydenham, always a Nebraska boomer, might have given more attention to Fort McPherson's garden—~~one~~ one of the state's pioneer irrigation projects. Dr. Wilson had reported on it the last of May:

The vegetables in the Post garden are doing ~~exceedingly~~ well. A quantity of the vegetables have already become eatable, such as Lettuce, Peas, Radishes and Onions and have been gathered and distributed freely among the Officers, their families and the enlisted men of the Post. Potatoes, Corn, tomatoes and cabbage are doing finely and promise a good average yield.

The garden is watered by means of pumps stationed at intervals and are worked by horse power, a water wheel and pump combined has been constructed and placed in the South /sic, Platte River, it performed its duty exceedingly well for a while, but the ever changing quicksands of the Platte have rendered it useless for the present at least. /"Post Surgeon's Returns", May 1870./

At the end of July, Wilson added:

Vegetables in abundance have been distributed among the troops at the Post. The yield of cucumbers, beets and cabbage have been very large, and the supply bids fair to last another month. Melons, onions and corn are thriving finely and will be fit for use during the ensuing month.

/Ibid., July 1870./

Neither was Sydenham exaggerated^{ly} about the region of Fort McPherson (it was located in Lincoln County) developing into a ranching region of importance. The following excerpt is from an article which originally appeared in a February 1870-issue of the North Platte Independent, and tells of the start of Nebraska's ranching business:

Very little snow falls--never enough for good sleighing; consequently the dried grass of the prairie does not rot and become worthless, but continues to be quite nutritious throughout the winter. Cattle and sheep like it. They even reject the cut hay off the stack, when they can have free access to the natural grass. Besides, during the mild weather such as we have had for a few weeks past, the old roots ~~put~~ put out new shoots which are eaten by the stock with much relish.

No shelter is ordinarily needed to protect the animals from the cold. When storms set in, the cattle are driven to the neighboring canyons or to the thickets on the river islands, where the force of the wind is greatly broken.

The Platte River and its numerous tributaries always supply an abundance of pure water, one of the first requisites to successful stock-raising.

Without the facilities of a good market, the raising of stock, like every other branch of business, would fail to thrive. Here, along the Pacific Railroad, are the best arrangements for shipping animals. Probably at every station of any importance stock-yards will, in time, be constructed by the Railroad Company. At this place, there is already every convenience for shipment of cattle.

Messrs. /Morell Case/ Keith & /Guy/ Barton have commenced, and will continue for the present, to ship one car load of stock weekly to Omaha. When the bridge across the South Platte is completed, increased means will be afforded for bringing safely to a good market the cattle which are raised on the south side of that river.

Mr. M/ahlon/. H. Brown is, we believe, the first person who brought to this place a herd of Texas cattle. The herd consisted of 800 head, and were driven from the Washita Mountains, in northern Texas, and arrived here in the fall of 1868. Last fall he drove another herd numbering 1,700 a large portion of which he sold to Messrs. Keith & Barton, who have them feeding on the prairie near O'Fallon station. This firm, and various individuals in the neighborhood of North Platte have about 2,000 head of cattle, and 200 sheep. In the vicinity of Ft. McPherson there are 1,800; at McPherson station, say 200; at Plum Creek, Mr. Daniel Freeman has nearly 500; at Ogallala, the ex-telegraph operator and his partner have 200--mostly young cattle; /James A./ Moore & Bro. at Sidney have 2,000 cattle and sheep--mostly the latter.

To sum up: there is between Plum Creek and Sidney stations, an aggregate of nearly 7,000 cattle and sheep, which all--or nearly all--herded on the plains, without shelter excepting that which nature affords.

This is a good beginning, when we consider that the U.P.R.R. has not been completed to Promontory one year, and to North Platte scarcely three years. /Plattsmouth, Nebraska Herald, Thursday, 3 March 1870.]

Beyond the taking of the census, little of excitement happened at Fort McPherson during August. A few short expeditions were made from the fort. One was a "hunt and scout" commanded by Brevet General Carr, along with Lieutenant Thomas and fifteen enlisted men of Company I. They "marched 8 miles /south/ beyond Medicine Lake Creek. Killed a quantity of large game. No Indians and returned on the 24th." Two days later, Lieutenant Ward, assigned to a position west of the forks of the river, "crossed the south Platte River and proceeded to follow a trail of a party of Indians reported to have been seen that day....Marched to Red Willow Creek...finding no trails, proceeded west 20 miles thence north 30 miles, returned on the 28th inst." /"Post Returns", August 1870./

September was equally unexciting. Dr. F. W. Elbrey, now the post surgeon, could only report that an addition was built onto the post hospital and that an additional five acres of land had been plowed as an addition to the post garden. Elbrey had become Post Surgeon in August, and he was not pleased with the condition of the post. First, he pointed out, though the post was undermanned according to regulations, the men were overcrowded, according to military standards. He continued:

...Every man should have a separate bed; not only do two men sleep together in one bed but most of the beds are arranged with two tiers. There is a want of cleanliness as to floors, walls and bedding....All the barracks leak to such an extent that they will admit rain and snow. The bedding should be aired daily, the straw in the bedsacks

should be removed more frequently. The latrines need thorough cleaning and lime washing.

The officers quarters are not only inadequate for the ensuing winter but almost all of them leak making many of the rooms very damp to the detriment of the health and comfort of the inmates. Some of the laundresses quarters and some of the buildings used by the Q. M. dept. are covered with earth roofs, which can afford but little protection in a rain of considerable duration. /"Post Surgeon's Returns", September 1870./

A few short expeditions were made from the fort during the autumn, but none were of great importance. It seems likely that Cody might have accompanied some of them, but his name is not mentioned. Near the end of the year, one event of importance did occur. Dr. Elbrey recorded that on December 23rd:

The Billard Salon owned by the Post Traders and which was constructed during the month of March, 1870, for the use of the officers of the garrison as a billard and club room, was destroyed by fire between hours of 7 and 9 o'clock P. M. this day.

The fire originated from a defective chimney. The assembly call was promptly sounded in the garrison upon the first discovery of the flames, and the men of the different companies promptly repaired to the fire with the garrison fire buckets, but were unable to save the building in consequence of the fire having gained too much headway, between the ceiling and the roof. By the exertions of the

men the billard tables, two in number were saved in a damaged condition. The other furniture of the room was saved. The owners loss estimated at about \$5000. /Ibid., December 1870./

To the officers of an isolated post in the middle of winter, this loss was probably of great importance. Mrs. Cody was later to complain of Buffalo Bill's wastral habits. One wonders if he was a visitor to the billard salon, or, if the low caste of an "Indian scout", in the military chain of command, kept him outside its door. And what of John Weister, the twenty-three year old "billiard saloon tender", who had been wounded, wounded in the July Indian attack--was this his place of employment?

More Texas cattle had been brought into the region during the aumtumn of the year, ~~including the herd of John Bratt & Company, who built their home ranch west of the fort. During the company years, it was to be the most important ranch in the vicinity of the post with their cattle ranging as far south as the Republican River.~~ Not all the cattle were kept in the Platte Valley itself. Some were driven north to the South Fork of the Loup, where a handfull of cowboys, or herders as they were then known, wintered, far from any other aspect of civilization.

After a pre-Christmas blizzard, four cowboys from the Loup followed a herd of straying cattle back toward the Platte River, ending up at the railroad siding of Plum Creek, now Lexington, where they took Christmas dinner at the eating and rooming house. The lonesome cowboy took the opportunity to write the following letter to his sister in Georgia:

Plum Creek, U. P. R. R.
/Sunday, / Dec. 25th 1870.

Darling Einna

The plesure of wríteing to you came rather unexpected. I left my camp on the Lo/u/pe river two days ago on the trail of twelve hundred head of cattle that left in a snow storme. There is fore of us had a cold time I have my ears and hands frozen, we had to get water by melting snow.

We came to this station to warter our horses, and get a fresh suply of food and will leave in the morning after the cattle dont know when we will find them and when we do will return to the Lope.

I have just pertaken of a splindid Christmas dinner rather unexspectad I wrote you I thought of haveing a rosted deer only.

I am getting a long very well only sick parte of the time to see and hear from you. I think there is letters on the way to my camp, for me now from McPherson. If you have written me? I write you every chance wñich has been quite often. Why dont you write often? I am at the same place and likely to be until I am wanted by any of you to change bases. Adress the same Wm H. Miles, McPherson Station Cottonwood Spring Nebraska

Darling Ones, My thoughts have been with you all the time to day thinking over the changes, since a few shorte Christmases a go we spent in such glee--and this I mostly spent riding over snow coverd mountaines in a wilde cuntry, so far a way

But thank God so far as I know I am thankful all
has gone well, and we /are/ nomberd with the blessed.

It is getting very darke so I will close in haste.
I trust you are haveing a merry Christ and all is well
at S/pring/. H/ill/.

Good bye Yours

H

The Young cowboy, just two weeks short of his twenty-fifth birthday, was known in the region of Fort McPherson as William Herbert or Paddy Miles. A seasoned veteran of the Georgia cavalry before his twentieth birthday, his fore-going letter does not appear to sound mysterious--it was meant to be so. Like other frontiersmen--and Herbert or Paddy developed into a real one--he had a past. Over the years, it became at least partly known to his friends and neighbors, but in December 1870, it was a real secret--and it is doubtful if the above letter was mailed directly to her. At this time, he was not well known in the area, probably having arrived sometime during the previous months (he is not in the 1870 census), but within a short time he began to make his mark on the country.

But, on Christmas Day, 1870, he was a homesick herder of Texas cattle on the Nebraska frontier, far from the old plantation in Glynn County, Georgia--where he was wanted for murder.