



Buffalo Tales



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Fort Kearny's Unconventional Army Units

By Kevin Moeller

Fort Kearny was operational near present day Kearney, Nebraska from 1848 until 1871. During this short period, soldiers at Fort Kearny played an important role in protecting and supplying overland travelers along the Platte River road. During the Civil War, when the Plains Indians stepped up their attacks on the Great Plains, Fort Kearny and its soldiers played a crucial role in protecting overland emigrants and Nebraska settlers. Although the fort was usually garrisoned by regular troops, a shortage of soldiers during the Civil War forced the military to send many unconventional military units to Fort Kearny, Nebraska volunteer militias, Galvanized Yankees (Confederate prisoners of war), and Indian scout units all called Fort Kearny home at one time or another. The unconventional units stationed at Fort Kearny were paramount in pacifying Nebraska and the Great Plains and opening the doors for settlement.

Indian attacks were sparked by the massive migrations of overland travelers that swept across the Nebraska Territory from the late 1840's through the 1860's. As traffic increased along the overland trails, Native Americans became more hostile towards overland travelers. The travelers spread disease, decimated native grasses, and utilized nearly all the timber along the Platte River road, which had detrimental effects on Native Americans and caused the buffalo to disperse. The overland travelers, freight companies, and businessmen who operated road ranches along the Platte River lobbied the federal government to establish forts and a military presence to protect citizens and discourage hostile activities by the local indigenous population.

As Indian attacks increased during the Civil War, the federal government realized a larger military presence was necessary along the Platte River road. Military man-power was limited and alternative policies for recruitment grew necessary. The three primary policies for garrisoning troops at Fort Kearny during the Civil War were the following: moving volunteer militias from eastern Nebraska to Fort Kearny, enlisting captured Confederate soldiers into the U.S. Army, and organizing Indians as scouts.

The First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry Regiment was organized and led by Col. John Thayer and was attached to Second Brigade, Third Division, U.S. Army. Colonel Thayer had military experience and was appointed regimental commander by Governor Alvin Saunders. On October 4, 1862, Colonel Thayer was promoted to Brigadier General and Colonel R.R. Livingston was named the commander of the First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry. The original enlisted men of the First Nebraska Volunteers mustered out of service in Nebraska on August 13, 1864. Many reenlisted and were transferred to Fort Kearny where they were

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designated as the First Nebraska Veteran Cavalry. This unit and the Second Nebraska Cavalry protected settlers and freight companies along the Platte River Road and fought Indians who were at war with the United States. Some of the Nebraska Volunteers were sent to Minnesota to fight Santee Sioux who were waging war against local settlers.

In 1864 Indian attacks along the Platte River road became epidemic. Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Lakota Sioux increased their attacks in the Republican and Platte valleys in retaliation for the federal government's war against the Santee Sioux in Minnesota and the massacre of Cheyenne Chief Black Kettle's people at Sand Creek, Colorado. The attacks became so severe and so frequent, that freighting companies ceased operations and settlers fled eastward in panic. The federal government decided to launch a military campaign against the hostile tribes and Fort Kearny would play a pivotal role in military operations.

While on his way to Fort Kearny to organize an expedition against "hostile" Indians, General Sam Curtis, head of the Department of Kansas, stopped at Columbus, Nebraska to inquire about enlisting Pawnees. Two local interpreters, Frank North and Joseph McFadden, accompanied the general to the Pawnee Agency near Genoa, where they recruited seventy Pawnee warriors to serve as scouts on the expedition. General Curtis favored the idea of using Indians who were friendly with whites as allies against "hostile" Indians. Curtis believed the Pawnees might be inclined to ally with the U.S. since they were traditional enemies of the Lakota and they were on the verge of going to war with

their enemies. The Pawnees agreed to join General Curtis who promised bonuses if they furnished their own horses. The Pawnees proceeded to Fort Kearny where they joined the mounting expedition.

The officers at Fort Kearny were very interested in the Pawnees and curious to see how they would handle themselves. The Pawnees spent two weeks at Fort Kearny organizing with other units before they embarked on their campaign. The Pawnees impressed General Curtis, who, after returning to Fort Kearny, ordered Frank North to organize an entire company of Pawnee scouts and made North the commander. North went to the Pawnee Agency and, after visiting with Pawnee leaders, enlisted 100 Pawnee scouts. In the Fall of 1865 the



White Horse, a Pawnee Indian Scout
 Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society
 (NSHS 1396-8)

Pawnees left Columbus for Fort Kearny where they wintered. Captain Lee Gillette commanded Fort Kearny and he ordered Frank North to drill the Pawnees in manual of arms. North attempted the training but it was a complete failure. The Pawnees did not understand the English commands and there were no words in their language that expressed such military orders. North informed Captain Gillette that the Pawnees would either need to learn English or new words would need to be added to the Pawnee language. Gillette did not like either proposition and conceded that the Pawnees would never become infantrymen. Instead of becoming regular soldiers, the Pawnees operated as scouts, a task they had trained for since childhood.

An example of the scouting abilities of the Pawnees took place during the 5th Cavalry's Republican River Expedition in 1869. Buffalo Bill Cody accompanied this expedition and saw first hand the skills of the Pawnee scouts. During the expedition, the 5th Cavalry followed a horseshoe shaped trail that traversed more than 150 miles across Nebraska and Kansas. Leading the troops and following the trail was a young Pawnee scout. As the unit moved through the thick buffalo grass, Cody became frustrated and asked Luther North, the commanding officer of the Pawnee scouts, if the Pawnee scout was actually following an Indian trail. North told Cody that he believed the scout was on to something but he was not certain. Cody again complained, pointing out that he saw no signs of horse tracks or blemishes in the grass. Eventually Cody and North rode up to the scout and asked him what he was following. The Pawnee replied that he was following a fresh set of pony tracks. The young scout looked up and pointed to a distant ridge of sand hills, about three miles ahead. The Pawnee scout informed Cody and North that when they reached that point they would find a definitive Indian trail. When they finally reached the location, there it was...they found numerous pony tracks and a clear Indian trail. Cody was now convinced of the Pawnee's tracking skills and commented that he was one of the best that he had ever seen.

The Pawnee scouts played a pivotal role over the next thirteen years in helping the U.S. Army defeat Indians at war with the U.S. The Pawnees usually rode in front of the regiment and when an enemy was discovered the scouts were the first, and sometimes only, soldiers to engage the enemy. If the opportunity permitted itself, the Pawnees stripped off their clothes and removed their saddles from their horses, making them faster so that they could engage the enemy before they dispersed. During their tenure, the Pawnees helped defeat the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers, protected the Union Pacific railroad, helped subjugate the Northern Cheyennes, and assisted in defeating their long-time enemy, the Lakotas. They fought gallantly and one scout, Angry Bear, was awarded the Medal of Honor. Arguably, the Pawnee scouts were the best military unit stationed at Fort Kearny.

While the Pawnee scouts filled an important niche in the Civil War-era military, they could not be relied upon to carry out the duties of regular troops. The federal government, therefore, recruited Confederate prisoners of war in an effort to muster more soldiers onto the frontier to fight Indians and protect railroads, overland travelers, freighting companies, and settlers. The ex-Confederate soldiers, often called

Galvanized Yankees or whitewashed Rebs, served from September 1864 to November 1866. About 6,000 Confederate soldiers took an oath of allegiance to the United States. Known as the United States Volunteers, Galvanized Yankees filled out six regiments. The 3rd Regiment was commanded by Christopher H. McNally and saw action in the Platte Valley. Several units from the 3rd were garrisoned at Fort Kearny.

The 3rd Regiment of the U.S. Volunteers was instrumental in re-establishing mail and stage services from the Missouri River, and fought gallantly in many battles against Indians. Units garrisoned at Fort Kearny provided protection for the Union Pacific Railroad and the freighting companies that ran through the Platte River valley. Often these soldiers served in a state of anonymity for fear of their Confederate ties being discovered. The Galvanized Yankees were instrumental in the federal government's defense of the western frontier during the Civil War.

Several famous frontier personalities also briefly called Fort Kearney home. Buffalo Bill Cody, for example, stayed at Fort Kearny on numerous occasions during his years as a military scout. James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok was also an occasional visitor to the fort. Hickok worked for the Army from 1866-69, tracking down Army deserters, thieves, and other outlaws. While travelling through Nebraska he often stayed at Fort Kearny. Fort Kearny also hosted the famous 9th and 10th Cavalry. Known as the "Buffalo Soldiers," these all black cavalry units proved to be some of the best in the frontier-era military.

The 1850's and 1860's were foundation years for Nebraska. In 1854 settlement was officially opened in the Nebraska Territory and in 1867 Nebraska became the 37th state. The Civil War was a trying time for all Americans, even the people living on the outskirts of settlement in places like Nebraska. The need for all able-bodied men to serve in the Union Army left the western frontier exposed. Indian nations realized the United States' preoccupation with the Civil War provided the opportunity to protect their lands and homes with increased aggression. The federal government, therefore, was forced to improvise and find new policies for fighting Indians and protecting people on the western frontier. Unconventional units such as the Nebraska volunteers units, Pawnee Scouts, and Galvanized Yankees operated out of Fort Kearny in an effort to protect Nebraska's Platte Valley.



Blue Hawk (seated) and Coming Around with the Herd, Pawnee Scouts

Courtesy of Nebraska State Historical Society
(NSHS M613-3)

The unconventional units that served at Fort Kearny were in many ways equal to or better than the regular troops. The Pawnee scouts, for example, were proven warriors and battle hardened from years of fighting the Lakotas, Cheyennes, and Arapahos. Moreover, the Pawnees were eager to wage war against their enemies, particularly when warfare was sanctioned by the federal government. The Galvanized Yankees were also experienced soldiers from their years of fighting in the Civil War. They were not experienced Indian fighters like the Pawnees, but they were not "raw" or "green" troops like some regular units. Many of the militias were ill-experienced and one could claim they were inferior to regular army soldiers. However, at least they were volunteers and they had as much experience at fighting Indians as regular soldiers from back east. These vastly different units from incredibly different backgrounds called Fort Kearny home during the Civil War. Their services and Fort Kearny's role in settling the West was paramount and helped connect old America with the new West.

About the Author: Kevin Moeller finished his M.A. in History from UNK in May 2005. In the Fall of 2005 he will begin working on a Ph.D. in History at the University of New Mexico.

From the Society:

The Buffalo County Historical Society held its annual meeting on April 10th at the Holiday Inn. Current board members—Dan Speirs, Susan Lynch, and Mary Henning—were reelected. Barb Riege was elected to fill an expired term and Barbara O'Neill was appointed to fill a vacant seat.

The first May Day Extravaganza held at the Trails and Rails Museum was such a hit that it will become an annual event! Families learned the history of May Day, danced around the May Pole, worked on crafts, and enjoyed refreshments.

Mark your calendars for the biggest event of the year...Wagons West: Fiddlin Around the Trails and Rails Contest. The event will be held on Saturday, June 18th. Events will include fiddling contest, living history demonstrations, pie-eating contest, kids costume contest (pioneer and western outfits), apple bobbing, cowboy poetry, live music, horseshoe pitching, corn shelling, and much more. Activities begin at 9:00 a.m. and admission is FREE!

Buffalo County Historical Society is still in need of volunteers to help with our gift shop and special events during the summer. Please contact Jennifer for further details.

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Dr. Mark R. Ellis, Editor

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Supporting Membership\$50.00

Life memberships are \$150.00 for individual; \$200.00 for couple.

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Term expiring June 1, 2005: Dan Speirs, Robert Goldenstein, Mary Henning and Larry Nansel.

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From the Editor:

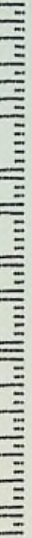
Over the past year the UNK History Department has been involved in the Veteran's History Project, a nationwide endeavor that has collected 30,000 interviews of veterans. UNK students have interviewed 125 veterans. The U.S. Congress initiated the project in 2000 as a way to chronicle and preserve the wartime experiences of American veterans. Students who participate in the project will interview a veteran and then transcribe the interview. This information will be stored at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and will eventually be available online. We are currently compiling a list of veterans for UNK students to interview. If anyone is interested in participating in the project please contact Mark Ellis at the UNK History Department: (308) 865-8767 or by email: ellismr@unk.edu.

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