

Glimpses of Garrison Life

Daily routine at the United States military posts in the Upper Mississippi Valley followed a pattern established by the *General Regulations for the Army*. At dawn the trumpeters of the post took their stations, and *reveille* called the sleeping garrison to the duties of the day. The rolls of the companies were called in front of the quarters, then the quarters were put in order, the ground in front swept, and the horses fed and watered. After sick call had sounded those who were ill in the barracks were taken to the hospital. Following a second roll call, breakfast was served at nine o'clock. Then came the various tasks of the day under the supervision of a member of the garrison designated as "officer of the day." One detail swept the parade ground, sentinels were posted, and other details were assigned the work of the day.

At three o'clock in the afternoon a third roll call was followed by dinner. Half an hour before sunset the trumpeters called the garrison for dress parade. Drills and maneuvers were practiced and orders were read. Following dress parade, companies were dismissed, arms were placed in the arm racks, and the horses were bedded for the

night. Another roll call was followed by tattoo, candles were extinguished, and the troops settled down in their quarters for the night.

Routine tasks of the garrison varied with the seasons. In the spring and summer details were sent across the Mississippi to cultivate gardens on an extensive military reservation in the Iowa country adjoining the old Spanish land grant to Basil Giard. Other detachments were assigned the task of making hay for the horses and cattle at the post. This, too, was obtained on the broad prairie of the military reservation. In the fall, soldiers were employed in cutting the enormous supply of logs needed for the many fireplaces of the fort during the long, cold winters.

Many special tasks occupied the garrison while the new Fort Crawford was under construction — quarrying stone in the nearby bluffs, sawing lumber at the mill on Yellow River, burning lime in the coulee across the Mississippi, making shingles and squaring pickets, and building the fort itself. Far more satisfactory than these menial tasks were trips to the lead mine region in Iowa to enforce the laws of the United States against trespassing miners or excursions into the Indian country to round up Winnebago or Sauk and Fox offenders.

Routine garrison duty and field campaigns, however, did not occupy all of the time of the soldiers at Fort Crawford. Play, too, mingled with work. At the close of the Indian Council in 1829,

for example, Commissioners Atwater, Menard, and McNeil gave a ball for their friends at Prairie du Chien. The ball, held at the council house, was attended by the officers of the fort and their wives, as well as by all the best families of the village. It was an interesting scene. Inside the council house were men and women of culture and refinement, West Point graduates and gentle ladies from cities of the East; outside the house, peeking through the doors and windows, and occasionally dancing by themselves in the open air was a motley crowd of curious Indians, half-breeds, and common folk of the village. All were very happy, and the party broke up at about midnight.

The officers at Fort Crawford established a library and a reading room at their own expense. A post school for instruction of the children was organized with the army chaplain as teacher. The library contained books on history, geography, mathematics, chemistry and other sciences, and files of such periodicals as the *National Intelligencer* and the *National Gazette*.

Young officers took special delight in giving a dancing party in honor of some visitor at the fort, and in presenting amateur theatricals for their entertainment in the fort theatre. During the spring, summer, and fall, ladies at Fort Crawford often accompanied details to Fort Snelling and Fort Winnebago to visit friends there. Wolf hunts by moonlight on the prairie, and hunting excursions

in the Iowa country across the Mississippi were greatly enjoyed by soldiers as well as visitors to the fort.

The routine of garrison life at Fort Crawford was occasionally broken by the arrival of recruits from St. Louis or the East, and likewise by the transfer of officers and men from one post to another. Grim tragedy, too, sometimes caused excitement. During the command of Major Kearny in 1828, a young man, Reneka by name, of good education, who had joined the army for the sake of adventure, engaged in a drinking party with some companions. Unused to liquor, he became sick and started for the barracks. He emerged with a rifle swinging it around his head like a madman. Hearing the commotion, Lieutenant John Mackenzie, officer of the day, strode outside and ordered a corporal to take Reneka to the guardhouse. The latter paused a moment, raised his rifle, and shot Mackenzie through the head killing him instantly. Reneka was arrested and confined to the guardhouse; then tried, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. Sick with remorse for his hasty act, he made a touching speech from the gallows, and bravely paid the penalty for his crime.

Besides the Reneka tragedy, two other brutal murders stained the annals of Fort Crawford. In 1831 an officer, J. P. Hall, struck a soldier named Barrette in the head with a pitchfork handle and broke his skull. Although Hall was acquitted, he

never forgot the murder and left the service. In the second instance, a provost sergeant, Coffin by name, caught a soldier by the name of Beckett sneaking out of the fort one night after tattoo had sounded. He kicked and beat Beckett until he was insensible, and then ordered him to be dragged away to the guardhouse. Some days later he entered a room where Coffin stood with his back to the door, and shot him dead with an army musket. Beckett was arrested and placed in the guardhouse, but he managed to escape. He was caught later in the lead region near Cassville, taken to Mineral Point, tried by the civil authorities there, and sentenced to be hanged. He was brought back to Prairie du Chien, where, like Reneka, he paid the penalty for his crime.

In pleasant contrast to these grim tragedies at Fort Crawford was the courtship of Lieutenant Jefferson Davis when he wooed and won Sarah Knox Taylor, the fair daughter of his commanding officer. A persistent tradition has it that the young lovers when faced with parental disapproval of the match, eloped from Fort Crawford, but the facts in the case seem to spoil this story. It is true that Colonel Taylor, hoping to spare his daughter the hardships and discomforts of the wife of an officer at frontier army posts, opposed the match. Miss Taylor, however, married Davis, with the knowledge but without the approval of her father, at the home of her sister near Louisville, Kentucky.

At Fort Crawford, as at other frontier posts, the presence of grog shops nearby added to the problems of discipline. At one time, in order to check the use of liquor by soldiers, "The Fort Crawford Temperance Society" was organized. Shortly thereafter, Major John Garland inspected the post and complimented the officers on the sobriety of the men. That night Major Garland and another officer took a stroll outside the fort before retiring. As they were returning to the sally-port, the attention of the major was attracted by the strange antics of an approaching cat. The two officers stepped over in its direction, and suddenly the animal stopped. Garland reached down, picked it up, and discovered he held a cat's skin stuffed with a bladder full of whisky. Stepping on the string had stopped the cat's mysterious journey toward a thirsty soldier within the barracks.

Various methods of punishment for those who disobeyed orders or violated military regulations were administered by various commandants at Fort Crawford. Confinement in the guardhouse, extra police duty, and curtailment of privileges were among the most common. But it remained for Colonel Taylor to introduce an unusual but effective method of punishment. This consisted in taking hold of both ears of the culprit, then shaking him severely — a treatment called "Wooling." One day when all the garrison had been mustered for dress parade, Colonel Taylor came out to look

over his troops, and observed a big German recruit who constantly failed to execute the commands correctly because his knowledge of English was faulty and it was difficult for him to understand the commands. Taylor, unaware of the true situation, thought the fellow was wilfully disobeying; and, walking up to the recruit, began to "wool" him. The German, resenting such treatment, drew back and struck Taylor such a blow that he fell like a log. Soldiers rushed upon the fellow ready almost to kill him for this act of insubordination to "Old Zack;" but Taylor arose and ordered them to leave him alone, saying he would make a good soldier. The fellow afterwards became a valuable addition to the garrison, and served faithfully throughout the Black Hawk War.

Supplies for Fort Crawford were brought from St. Louis first by keelboat or barge and later by steamboat. Their loads of flour, beans, pork, salt, candles, clothing, whisky, soap, tobacco, coffee, and miscellaneous items for the sutler's store were always welcome. Bread baked by a soldier of the garrison, meat, and beans were staple items in the soldier's diet. Vegetables in season raised in the garrison gardens across the river added variety to the mess. Game, too, killed by the sportsmen, and fish caught by the anglers of the post, made a welcome change from pork and beef.

Out of a soldier's modest cash allowance of five — later six — dollars a month he could buy small

necessities and some luxuries at the sutler's store. Anything and everything could be purchased at the sutler's store — currants, raisins, candy, soap, tobacco, shoes, butter, cheese, clothing, spices, needles, tinware, brooms, brushes, and a multitude of other items. It was, in fact, grocery, hardware, dry goods, and clothing store for the fort. A council of officers fixed prices to prevent the sutler from charging unreasonable amounts for his goods, and he paid from ten to fifteen cents a month for every officer and enlisted man into a "post fund." This money was used for the relief of widows and orphans of soldiers, for the maintenance of the post school and band, and for the purchase of books for the post library.

Life at old Fort Crawford was indeed a mosaic of many parts. Visitors to the post invariably mentioned the friendly hospitality of the garrison and the unfailing courtesy both of officers and men. Inspection reports indicate that meticulous attention was given to military regulations at this post. The coming and going of troops, menial tasks changing with the seasons, high adventure on trips into the Indian country, the arrival of recruits, drill and inspection, dress parade and fatigue duty, dances and theatricals, hunting and fishing, work and play — all these filled the days, and months, and years of a very human garrison at this outpost on the frontier.