

The Second Fort Des Moines

May, 1943, marks the centennial anniversary of the establishment of Fort Des Moines at the junction of the Des Moines River and the Raccoon Fork. Although all visible evidences of this old fort have been removed, it is fitting that the circumstances of the establishment of that early military post should be recalled at this time.

The Des Moines Valley a hundred years ago was occupied by the Sauk and Fox Indians. For several years the pressure of white settlers on the eastern border of the Indian lands had been increasing. Governor Chambers tried to buy a large area in 1841 and remove the Indians from central Iowa to a reservation at the source of the Des Moines River but the Sauks and Foxes refused to sell. In October of the following year, however, a treaty was negotiated whereby the confederated tribes agreed to surrender their land and move to Kansas.

Meanwhile, a company of United States Dragoons, with Captain James Allen in command, had been stationed at Fort Sanford on the left side of the Des Moines River about twenty miles west of Fairfield near the Sauk and Fox agency.

The soldiers were needed not to protect the settlers from savage depredations but primarily to prevent the encroachment of white men on the Indian hunting grounds. Indeed, the traders and land seekers on the frontier were guilty of all sorts of offenses against the Indians. Not only were they anxious to stake out claims in the Indian country but they cheated the red men and debauched them with whisky. The dragoons at Fort Sanford prevented open hostilities but they were unable to stem the tide of settlement or to stop petty crime. Removal of the Indians seemed to be the only feasible plan, but the native red men were reluctant to leave "the lands that were attached to them by the traditions of centuries".

According to the treaty of 1842 the Sauks and Foxes ceded to the United States all their land in central Iowa and agreed to move west of a meridian running through the Red Rocks on the Des Moines River by the following May and to leave the State in three years. In the meantime no settlements were to be permitted within the western part of the reservation.

To protect the Indians in this stipulation and to enable the government to fulfill its obligations under the treaty, the establishment of a military post west of the Red Rocks line seemed desirable. For the purpose of selecting a site for the new

fort, Captain James Allen conducted a short exploratory expedition up the Des Moines River soon after the treaty was signed. It was only a two or three days' ride up the valley from Fort Sanford to the mouth of the Raccoon River. Probably Captain Allen was already familiar with that locality. At all events he looked no farther. There, he decided, the new post should be established.

This location on the principal river in Iowa near the center of the Sauk and Fox territory had often been mentioned as a good site for a fort. A man who knew the country well proposed in 1834 that a company of dragoons should be stationed at the mouth of the Raccoon River and kept "constantly on the trot" to see that Indians and settlers did not quarrel. Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, who was there in 1835, thought that the point of land between the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers was the best place for a fort in that part of the country. In a letter to the War Department, dated December 30, 1842, Captain Allen explained the reasons for his selection of that site for the fort. "I went up, as you know, last month as high as the mouth of the Raccoon River, and had in view at the time to look out a suitable point for the stationing of troops for the time required. And I did select, with a view to

recommend it, the point made by the junction of the Raccoon with the Des Moines. . . .

“My reasons for selecting that point are these: The soil is rich; and wood, stone, water and grass are all at hand. It will be high enough up the river to protect these Indians against the Sioux, and is in the heart of the best part of their new country, where the greatest effort will be made by the squatters to get in. It is about equidistant from the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, and offers a good route to both, the direct route to the Missouri passing around the heads of many ugly branches of Grand River. It will be 25 miles within the new line, about the right distance from the settlements, and above all of the Indian villages and trading houses (all of the Sacs have determined to make their villages on a larger prairie bottom that commences about two miles below, and the traders have selected their sites there also). It will also be about the head of keel-boat navigation on the Des Moines. I think it better than any point farther up, because it will be harder to get supplies higher up, and no point or post that may be established on this river need be kept up more than three years, or until these Indians shall leave. A post for the northern boundary of future Ioway will go far above the sources of the Des Moines.”

Good soldier and officer that he was, Captain Allen offered appropriate suggestions relative to the task at hand, and tendered his services in directing the work, if such an arrangement seemed to be desirable. "Now, as to the process of establishing this post", he wrote, "I do not seek the job; but I am willing to undertake it, if my suggestions for that purpose shall be approved. I would build but common log cabins, or huts, for both men and officers, giving them good floors, windows and doors, stables, very common, but close and roomy. Pickets, Block-houses and such like, not at all. The buildings to be placed in relations of comfort, convenience and good taste, and of defense, so far as the same may comply with the first rule.

"Ten mechanics, and five laborers, and four yoke of oxen, and tools and implements, and the small material, ought to be furnished by the Qr. Master's Dept. All to be ready to go up and begin early in the spring. Pine lumber for the most necessary parts of the buildings ought to be sent up in keel-boats, in the spring rise of the river. Provisions, and corn, &c., may be sent up at the same time.

"With such means and the force of my company, I could make a good and comfortable establishment at the mouth of the Raccoon during the

next summer, and, in the meantime, give to the Indians all necessary protection. One of their agents has told me that the Am. Fur Company would probably send up a steamboat to the Raccoon on the spring rise. If they do, it will be a good time to send up army supplies.

"I could easily have corn raised for me in that country if I could now contract for it, and permit a person to open a farm there. Such is the desire of people to get a footing in the country that I believe that now I could hire corn to be raised there, next summer, for 25 cts. per hushel. I could get lumber on as good terms, by allowing some one to build a mill. In short, there will be no difficulty in establishing and maintaining a post there if notice of such a design shall be given in time. But I hope that it will not be required of my company that they shall build this new post without the assistance of the hired labor that I have suggested. I have not the necessary mechanics for the purpose; and if I had, it would be requiring too much of them. It is not competent for dragoons to build their quarters and stables, and get their wood and do their duty as soldiers.

"I have but little to add to what is contained in the foregoing extract of my letter to the colonel. The new post will be so purely temporary that this character of it ought to be kept in view in its

construction. According to the plan and method that I have recommended, this post may be built and established, for one company of dragoons, for about twenty-five hundred dollars.

“If a company of infantry could also be sent to this new post, it would be well, although it would increase somewhat the expense of its establishment. Of the propriety of such an arrangement, the Department will best judge.

“But I will respectfully urge upon the Department the necessity for a speedy decision on the subject of this new post, that if it is to be established early measures may be taken to secure the timely transportation of the necessary materials and supplies. The rise of the Des Moines will occur in March.

“In regard to the point recommended for the new post, I may remark, that I have seen much of the territory of Ioway, and particularly of the valley of the Des Moines, having, in addition to my observations from there to the mouth of the Raccoon, crossed the territory with my company last Summer, on a direct route from Ft. Leavenworth to Ft. Atkinson, crossing the Des Moines above Raccoon, and from all that I have seen and learned I would recommend the point that I have designated as the most suitable for the post in question.

"All of this is predicated on the supposition that the late treaty with the Sac and Fox Indians will be approved and ratified; but this treaty is so very favorable and advantageous to the United States that I feel no apprehension for its fate."

Captain Allen's recommendations relative to the site were approved and Colonel Stephen W. Kearny, then commanding the third district at St. Louis, was directed to cause the post to be established. The Senate, however, delayed ratification of the treaty so that the decision to move the troops from Fort Sanford to the Raccoon Fork was not finally determined until the spring of 1843.

By Order No. 6, from the headquarters of the Third Military Department, Jefferson Barracks, on February 20, 1843, it was announced that a "temporary post will be established at as early a period as the weather will permit, on the River Des Moines, at or near the junction of the Raccoon, for the protection of the Sac and Fox Indians, and the interests of the Government on that frontier.

"The troops designated for the garrison of the new post are Captain Allen's company of the 1st Dragoons, at present stationed near the Sac and Fox Agency, and a company of the 1st Infantry now stationed at Fort Crawford, to be selected by

the Lieutenant-Colonel commanding the regiment.

“The site of the post will be determined upon by Captain Allen; and he will also have charge of the erection of the requisite buildings for the accommodation of the command; which will be constructed with as strict a regard to economy as may be consistent with the health of the troops, and conformably to the instructions forwarded from this office, or such order as he may hereafter receive from proper authority.”

Late in April, 1843, a steamboat came puffing up the Des Moines River and took a load of supplies to the new post. Captain Allen left Fort Sanford with a small detachment of dragoons on April 29th and was at the Raccoon Fork in time to unload the cargo from the boat. Leaving his men to guard the stores, he returned to the old agency for the purpose of completing the transfer of his company and provisions. On May 10th he dispatched a report of his movements to the War Department.

“I have located the post on the point I selected for it last fall, the point made by the junction of the Raccoon with the Des Moines”, he wrote. “I have delayed taking up my horses or removing my whole company because of the lateness of the Spring and the consequent scarcity of grass. It is too expensive now to take up full rations of corn,

and, the Des Moines river being low, I could not induce the steamboat that took up the corn and quartermaster's stores to make another trip at reasonable rates. I am using a small keel-boat and wagons, all public, for transportation of corn and some other stores, and will move with my company on the 18th instant. Fairfield, Ioway Territory, will be my first convenient postoffice, until another shall be established in the new territory just vacated by the Indians."

At first the new post was called Fort Raccoon. "I have recommended this name", wrote Captain Allen, "because the place has already a great notoriety under such designation for a great distance around it". But this name did not appeal to the authorities in Washington. "Fort Iowa would be a very good name", in the opinion of Adjutant General R. Jones, "but Raccoon would be shocking; at least in very bad taste." Apparently General Winfield Scott agreed, for a few days later he informed Captain Allen that Raccoon was not considered a proper designation for a military post and that, until otherwise directed, he should call the place Fort Des Moines. To this name Captain Allen objected. "I am afraid", he wrote, "that the latter designation for the post will divert much of our mails and supplies to the late post of this name on the Mississippi, the recollection of which is

still in the minds of many of the postmasters and public carriers." He therefore respectfully suggested "that some name be given to this post to which this inconvenience may not attach." But his letter got lost in the pigeonholes of Washington, and so the name Des Moines became permanently attached to the fort and to the town which, only twelve years later, was designated by law as the capital of the State.

The second Fort Des Moines was a busy place in the summer of 1843. Four officers and forty-eight dragoons arrived from Fort Sanford on the afternoon of May 20th, and they were joined the next day by Company F of the First Infantry under Captain J. R. B. Gardenier. On November 30, 1843, General Scott reported ninety-nine soldiers at the fort, of whom two were captains, three subalterns, one assistant surgeon, and ninety-three non-commissioned officers, musicians, artificers, and privates.

First a wharf was built to facilitate the landing of supplies brought up the river by boat. Next, the men broke sod for gardens. The first building was a storehouse and the second was the hospital at the north end of the parade grounds about three hundred yards west of the Des Moines River. Along a street running west from the wharf were several small log cabins for the sol-

diers. Beyond these barracks were the stables and corrals. Houses for the officers faced another street parallel to the Des Moines River. The buildings were thus arranged in the shape of an L. The flagstaff and well were just inside the angle.

For nearly three years the post at the Raccoon Fork was occupied. In the summer the soldiers worked in the gardens and rode over the prairie on military expeditions. Indians from their villages about two miles down the river often visited the fort, but the whisky-selling traders still preyed upon them. Finally, in March, 1846, the last remnant of the tribesmen who had not already gone to Kansas, in company with the soldiers, set out for the land beyond the Missouri and the site of Fort Des Moines was left for city builders.

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