

FORT DODGE



Buildings Fit For The National Capitol

By Barbara Oringderff

Fort Dodge, Kansas has never been “reconstructed” or “preserved” for the benefit of tourists. It is still in excellent shape after having been in continual use since it

was established in 1865. Today, the fort’s first permanent buildings, constructed of native limestone and completed in 1867, are surrounded by well-manicured lawns and the atmosphere of a safe and friendly small town.

Originally established as a supply depot and base of operations against the warring Plains Indians, Fort Dodge played an important part in shaping the history of the west. Fort Dodge was truly an "Indian fort", and from 1865 to 1878 the men serving at the post were continually involved in scouting, marches and campaigns against the Indians. From 1867, when the Treaty of Medicine Lodge Creek was signed and Fort Dodge became the northern boundary of the Indian Territories, until 1874, the fort was



This is the Custer House at Fort Dodge. Originally this was the commanding officer's quarters

involved in several major campaigns to stop Indian depredations on the plains.

In 1882 the frontier was considered closed and Fort Dodge was abandoned as a military post. On October 2, 1882, the last troops to garrison Fort Dodge were ordered south to Camp Supply in Indian Territory, and the post was turned over to a caretaker appointed by the War Depart-

ment. Finally, in 1889, the remaining acres of the military reservation (including the buildings) was purchased by Dodge City residents for \$1.25 an acre and turned over to the state for use as a state soldiers' home, which it remains today.

Strangely enough, many of the people living at the fort, as well as most of the people in the surrounding area, don't realize that we have a real

Indian fort in our midst! One couple who came from Garden City to live at the fort, laughed when I told them that they were living in one of the oldest buildings in Western Kansas! "I would have never thought it," she said, and I had to admit that you couldn't really tell it by looking at their room. Nicely furnished and immaculately clean, the room in the old barracks, now called

Nimitz Hall, looks like a modern apartment except for the three-foot deep windowsills in which she set her plants.

The stone used to construct Nimitz Hall and the other original buildings at Fort Dodge was quarried from five to 10 miles north of the post. Sixty teamsters (both civilian and soldiers) and more than 200 mules were kept busy hauling the heavy stone from the quarry to Fort Dodge. Lieutenant George A. Hesselberger was in charge of the construction project, and he saw to it that the buildings were not only durable, but pleasing to look at. The stones were of varying lengths, but were cut to 18-inch heights and two-foot thickness and then dressed prior to their use. Each barrack was designed to hold a company of approximately 50 men. The Negro troops of Fort Dodge, called "Buffalo Soldiers" by the Indians, were quartered in a separate frame building.

During much of 1866 and 1867, Lieutenant Hesselberger complained to the Dept. of the Missouri that his construction project was being hampered by a shortage of both men and



The old barn at Fort Dodge.



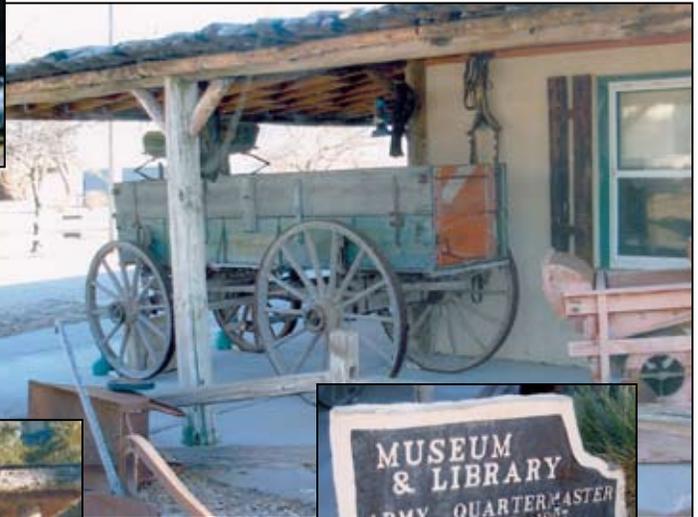


The front of the Fort Dodge barracks building as it looks today. The native limestone building was completed in 1867, making it one of the oldest buildings in Western Kansas.



shaken by his experience, asked that Douglass, the Fort Dodge commander, be censured for dereliction because too much money and manpower had been used for construction purposes while the frontier had obviously remained inadequately protected. In his report, he described the new buildings of Fort Dodge as so magnificent and smoothly dressed that they "appeared to be designed for the National Capitol!"

Major Douglass was later vindicated of any personal Fort Dodge Museum building



Fort Dodge Post Office.

material. Skilled carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, etc. were hard to find, and supply wagons headed for Fort Dodge over the Santa Fe Trail were consistently attacked by the Indians. The work details sent out under military quart to quarry stone, cut firewood, etc. also were subject to continual harassment from Indians, and it was amazing that the men were able to finish the buildings at all.

Lieutenant Hesselberger, however was not to get much praise for completing his project. In 1867, during General Hancock's campaign to punish the hostile Indians, Inspector-General R. B. Marcy was dispatched to Fort Dodge to review the military situation along the Santa Fe Trail. As the general neared Fort Dodge he received a first hand demonstration of the garrison's primary problem, when his wagon train was attacked by Indians and one of his officers killed. March, thoroughly

responsibility regarding improper conduct relative to the erection of the new buildings, but Lieutenant Hesselberger, the officer directly responsible was called before a court-martial hearing and dismissed from the service for misuse of government funds. The story goes that the dedication stones bearing Lieutenant Hesselberger's name and the date the new buildings were completed (see photo above) were already set when the court-martial took place, and in recognition of his personal disgrace a buffalo robe was hung over each dedication stone.

No buffalo skins hang over the stones today, and the beautifully kept buildings and grounds are open to the public year round. Don't miss the fort's great little museum or the house where General Custer stayed. ❁

