

Down The Treasure Trail

Old Fort Hays "Presidio of the Plains"



Antique Postcard of the Blockhouse at Fort Hays, KS.

This column is reprinted in loving memory of Clyde W. Blackburn, 1917-1999 (Barbara Oringderff, Editor)

By Clyde W. Blackburn

The discovery of gold in the mountains of western Kansas Territory in 1858 had more to do with the settlement of the Kansas plains, than any other event in its history. Because of it, wagon roads to the goldfields were cut into the prairie; and fortune seekers from the East had their first look at what had been called the Great American Desert. And they came by the thousands, with some following the Santa Fe Trail while others took the short cut: the Smokey Hill Trail.

The Indian had always been resentful of the white man invading his hunting grounds; and with this new horde of gold-seekers crossing their lands, they resorted to the only way they knew of stopping them: with murder and destruction. Control of the Plains Indian had been neglected during the Civil War; and at the same time the Kansas branch of the Union Pacific Railroad was slowly pushing its way west toward the goldfields and the new town of Denver. Protection for the travelers, the settlers and the railroad construction workers became an urgent necessity. For this reason, several forts were established upon the plains, with Fort Hays being one of them.

Originally called Fort Fletcher, the fort was located on Big Creek 15 miles below its later site. Established on October 11, 1865, the name was changed to Fort Hays on November 11, 1866. It was June 5, 1867 when Big Creek had one of its infamous floods, and destroyed the post which was built on the flood plain. Several soldiers were drowned, and as a result of this disaster General Hancock, the frontier commander, ordered that a new site be selected.

Following the order, a Major Gibbs of the Seventh Cavalry; Lieutenant Jackson, the engineer who laid out the post, and a fellow officer, Lieutenant Charles H. Brewster hoisted the flag over the new location on July 4, 1867. With near 7,600 acres within its confines the reservation was less than half the size of the next fort to the west, Fort Wallace. It did have the advantage, however, of containing much timber and plenty of water, neither of which Fort Wallace had a surplus of.

Looking at the site today, it is difficult to visualize how it appeared during the days when it was an important bastion upon the plains. After searching the National Archives we find the building at the post consisted of four barracks, four married

soldiers' quarters, nine officers' quarters, one quartermaster's office, three quartermaster's storehouses, a commissary office and storehouse, a guardhouse, hospital, dead house, bakery, cavalry stable, four quartermaster's stables and a quartermaster workshop. Whether all of these were in fact built is questionable, since Elizabeth Custer, General Armstrong Custer's wife, had a great deal to say about conditions at the fort, especially about the storage of food. She told of bacon and other provisions having no protection than being covered by canvas for months on end, with much spoilage and being rendered unfit to eat by rats. That the "fast buck" artist was with us even at that time is evidenced by Mrs. Custer's word, and I quote: "The bacon issued to the soldiers was not only rancid, but was supplied by dishonest contractors, who slipped in any foreign substance they could to make the weight come up to the required amount."

The soldiers garrisoned at the post were for the most part Confederates who had been captured by the North during the Civil War, then changed their allegiance. Later on, many of them were replaced by Negro troops often referred to as "Buffalo Soldiers". This was done as they were more willing to serve in frontier posts and had less prejudice against the Indians than white soldiers. The average strength of soldiers stationed at the fort in 1867 was 215. They were members of the Thirty-eighth infantry which had been brought out from St. Louis. They also brought the dreaded cholera with them and lost 23 of their numbers from the disease in a three-month period.

Of course, forts and the protection afforded by their garrisons brought people and towns, and Hays has the distinction of being



the only city founded at the border of a frontier fort to grow and prosper. Given birth by Phinney Moore and W. W. Webb, Hays was not the first city founded in present day Ellis County. By May of 1867 the railroad had been completed to Ellsworth, with grading being done over 100 miles west. Knowing the monetary advantages to be gained in establishing a town along the railroad, the Lull brothers of Salina founded the town of Rome. Rome was situated about a mile west of where Hays City was later started. At that time it was the only town in all of Western Kansas, and it grew rapidly. It was the meeting place for all the plainsmen of the region, with plenty of saloons to help them clear their throats of trail dust. The names of these dispensers of beverages were later used in all the towns founded, as the railroad moved west and they with it. "The Dewdrop Inn," "Graders Retreat" and "The Last Chance" were found all the way to Denver as the railroad moved west.

The first stone building in Rome was erected by W. E. "Buffalo Bill" Cody, and he also was one of the chief promoters of the town. Within a week of founding it had a population of 500, and at its zenith held 2,000 people within its borders. As with all frontier towns, many of the inhabitants left much to be desired, with having a large share of gamblers, cutthroats and prostitutes.

According to S. Motz, one of the original settlers of the town, the saloon business was a 24 hour activity.

But Rome was not to be in existence very long. When Fort Hays was located at the new site in July of 1867, Moore and Webb saw the possibilities and Hays City came into being. Perhaps Rome would have survived had not the railroad built a high embankment at the Big Creek bridge which closed the new town off from the fort. With each town trying to outdo the other it was finally a cholera epidemic in Rome which hastened its demise, and little by little the town's residents left until by 1870 only shells of buildings remained. Today, only a small marker stands to point out

where the first city in Western Kansas stood.

With Hays now a growing city and with a garrison of soldiers nearby, life in the town did not have the law-abiding constraint it has today. Mrs. Custer did a good job of describing Hays City at the time in her book, "Following the Guidon". "There was hardly a building in the town worth of the name, with the exception of the railroad station," she wrote. "A considerable part was built of rude frames covered with canvas, the shanties made of slabs, bits of dritwood, and logs with roofs covered with flattened tin cans". She further wrote: "the carousing and lawlessness of Hays City was so unending it seemed like a perpetual Fourth of July".

Many of the early inhabitants of frontier towns were Southerners displaced by the Civil War, and they resented the Negro soldiers stationed nearby. There was bloodshed between them on several occasions. In one incident a group of unruly soldiers killed a white man, for which three of them were arrested and placed in jail. On the night following, citizens of the town took them from the jail and hung them on the railroad trestle. In another instance some soldiers were denied admission to one of the local bordellos, and in the resulting fight several of them were killed. That night a crowd collected and drove every Negro resident out of town. With the exception of one old man and his wife, none were ever allowed to return. Because of this incident and the reputation the city gained because of it, many years were to pass before a Negro family attempted to reside in the city. In fact as late as the mid 1930s, the writer had a rather disturbing experience as a result of this previously gained reputation.

I was attending college at Hays at the time and had noted a sign near the town giving rather explicit instructions as to the color of those who were allowed in town overnight. It was shortly after this when several of us decided to take a weekend drive to look over the country. It was about

about 5:00 in the evening when we parked in front of a store in Nicodemus, the town founded and inhabited by the afore-mentioned race. We no sooner had parked when one of the male residents looked at the tag on our car and made the following observation to me: "White boy, there is a sign where you come from which says my color isn't allowed in your town overnight, and we don't allow any white boy in our town overnight". Needless to say we made an immediate departure.

Fort Hays was founded to help protect settlers and others against the depredation of the Indian, and it did its job well. But civilization was slowly marching westward and with it Indian problems lessened, and in 1870 General Pope, commander of the district which included the fort, wanted to consolidate several others with the one at Hays. By 1872, however, he had changed his mind and wanted both Fort Wallace and Fort Hays abandoned, which was finally accomplished in November of 1889. While an attempt was made to secure the fort site for a soldier's home it was never achieved, as title to the land was not in the hands of the state.

Then in 1895 the state legislature requested Congress to give the land for an experiment station, public park and location for a normal school. It wasn't until 1900 that the federal government gave the state title to the reservation, with the understanding it could be only used for the above-mentioned purposes. With the state legislature accepting the land in the name of the state and by its action of February 26, 1901, the college and experiment station were created and the Fort Hays Military Reservation was no more. Part of the reservation became a public park, and where the soldier had trod and the Indian had bargained, a golf course was built. Many years ago when I used to walk this course, I wondered how many of those about me realized they were walking where some of the most famous soldiers of the Old West had walked before them. ■

