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BUFFALO HUNT, CHASE
George Catlin
Linda Hall Library, Kansas City, Missouri



COMANCHE FEATS OF HORSEMANSHIP
George Catlin
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mrs. Joseph Harrison, Jr.

Fort Riley and American Indians, 1853-1911



The lure of the Army's newest post for Indian peoples was irresistible as the following three stories illustrate. In the first instance, a party of well-armed Indians spied a rural farmstead located not far from Fort Riley, and they advanced toward the cabin alarming the occupants.

On another day a larger party made its way to the fort itself. They rode with an air of confidence, armed and painted for battle. Lastly, while on their way to western bison hunting grounds, a party of Kansa (Kaw) Indians made its way straight for the town of Junction City where they hoped to fleece unsuspecting Euro-Americans.

On the surface these three encounters conjure up stereotypical images of Indians raiding farms, attacking soldiers, and stealing livestock. But what actually happened in each case

breaks formulaic depictions.

Consider the way in which the three previous episodes concluded. On their way to the post, the first group of Indians suddenly veered toward the farm, guns high in the air. The Indians' intent, however, was hardly to lay waste to the farm, kill the mother, and kidnap the children. Rather they dismounted, leaned their guns along the side of the cabin, and in sign language asked Charlotte Harvey, a pioneer woman, for some of the brightly colored cloth out of which she was sewing doll

clothes. She gave them the cloth, and after the Indians mounted their horses she handed them their guns. The Indians, satisfied with their acquisitions, continued on their way.

In July 1862 a group of unidentified, highly armed Indians passed through Junction City on their way to the post. They were escorting more than forty Confederate soldiers. A local newspaper editor related how these Indian sentinels guarded these “butternut asses” with “grim satisfaction.” No one questioned the Indians’ motives.

The third example happened some years after the Civil War. Junction City and the post were alerted to an approaching Kaw party. They opened the town to the Kaws and visited their encampment just across the Smoky Hill River. Indians, townspeople, and soldiers alike enjoyed a time of merriment and exchange. The only argument that day was among some of the Kaw wives who became disgusted by their husbands’ excessive use of whiskey.

Rather than living in a distant, isolated world outside an impenetrable post manned exclusively by Euro-American men, native men and women were an integral part of Army life.

From 1853 to 1911 Fort Riley watched over the crossroads of two worlds: native and newcomer. The full range of interactions, some peaceful, some bloody, between the soldiers of Fort Riley and the Indians actually occurred over a vast expanse of grasslands. The post served as a staging site for expeditions deployed throughout the Great Plains and as the headquarters of the District of the Upper Arkansas, which oversaw military operations conducted from posts as far west as Fort Lyon, Colorado. The history of Indians and the US Army at Fort Riley involves armed conflict, but it also includes the soldiers’ peacemaking and policing activities in Indian country, the collaborative work of Indians and soldiers in the military affairs of each other, and the development of commerce and community between the two

cultures. In fact, the army had direct and indirect associations with at least twenty-three different Indian nations. Fort Riley was a nexus for the ever-changing world that swirled around them.

In the early 1850s the army needed a site west of Fort Leavenworth to cope with the inevitable clashes between emigrant tribes, long-established tribes, and Americans who were arriving in greater numbers. Military officials decided that necessary repairs to Fort

Leavenworth, along the Missouri River in Kansas, would be a waste because it was too far to the east to enforce boundaries and policies. A more strategically sensible position was desired, and in 1852 a troop of the First Dragoons escorted Major E.A. Ogden on a reconnaissance mission to find a site for a new post. Ogden found the most promising terrain near the juncture of the Smoky Hill and Republican rivers, a long-established crossroads



CUSTER ATTACKS BLACK KETTLE'S CAMP

Kean Collection/Archive Photos/Getty Images



CUSTER'S DEMAND (DETAIL)

Charles Schreyvogel

Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma

of Indian activity. Soldiers erected a few temporary buildings in 1853, but Major Odgen oversaw the principal construction of the permanent buildings of the fort beginning in 1855.

The quartermaster reports of "Persons and Articles Hired" give no hint that Indians found official employment in the construction of Fort Riley. This does not mean, however, that an active underground market for Indian labor and goods did not exist. It is likely that the Kaws and others provided services and materials to individuals working at the new post. Indians understood the employment possibilities at the post and sought these opportunities. In 1864 Joseph Willmetts inquired about teamster work for a fellow Potawatomi friend, but his Fort Riley correspondent, Peter Roberson, replied saying that the post had more teams than work.

Conflict between whites and Indians on the Great Plains is the predominant image in American popular culture. Even before the Civil War, soldiers from Fort

Riley fought in major campaigns against Indians as they executed and enforced the laws and policies of the United States government. Fort Riley was the stage for the Second Dragoon Sioux Campaign of 1855, the Cheyenne Expedition of 1857, the 1860 Comanche and Kiowa Expedition, and the Curtis Expedition of 1864. Each of these expeditions employed Indian scouts, most often Delawares hired near the post, but some Indians were hired in the field.

Fort Riley also served as the headquarters of the District of the Upper Arkansas, responsible for the army's operations and posts in western Kansas and eastern Colorado. In 1864 Major Benjamin S. Henning commanded the district from Fort Riley. He was under the command of Major General Samuel R. Curtis at Fort Leavenworth who headed the Department of Kansas, which included the Territory of Colorado, Indian Territory, and the state of Kansas. Major Edward Wynkoop commanded Fort Lyon in southeastern Colorado,

but Curtis judged Wynkoop as too sympathetic to the Southern Cheyennes and Arapahos. Wynkoop often placed the blame for Indian-American hostilities upon whites, and advocated for the Indians' needs. Curtis communicated his disapproval to Henning at Fort Riley, who recalled Wynkoop and replaced him with Major Scott J. Anthony, an officer far less sensitive to the plight of High Plains Indians. It was Anthony who informed Colonel John Chivington, commander of the Third Colorado Militia, as to the whereabouts of a band of Southern Cheyennes and Arapahos along Sand Creek. Twenty-four soldiers were killed while the Indians suffered 137 casualties, including 109 women and children. No official punishment was ever levied, but Chivington was relieved of his command.

For the combatants these events were not romantic forays or the logical outcome of genocidal Euro-American policy. Black Kettle and his band of peaceful Cheyennes had never sought military confrontation with the US Army. Rather,

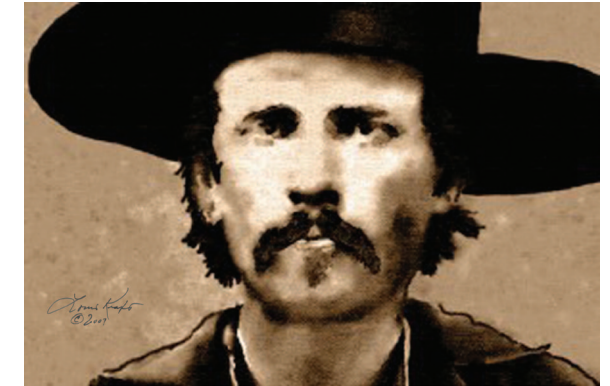
he often aided and abetted the Fort Riley soldiers in their pursuit of raiding Dog Soldiers, a powerful and warring military society of the Southern Cheyennes. In 1867 Big Head, a leader among the Dog Soldiers, held peace-minded Black Kettle, Little Raven (an Arapaho), and Poor Bear (a Plains Apache) against their wills. The trio escaped and traveled to Fort Larned to warn the commanders there and at Fort Riley as to the intentions and whereabouts of the Dog Soldiers.

Southern Cheyennes were a deeply divided people in the years between 1850 and 1880, and those of Black Kettle's persuasion gladly cooperated with the army in an attempt to secure tranquil relations with the United States. Working with Americans also endangered them. In November 1868 when Dog Soldiers arrived in Black Kettle's camp located on the western fringe of a peaceful village of Southern Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Comanches, Black Kettle realized too late the danger their presence represented. The Dog

Soldiers had left a trail for Custer's Osage scouts Little Beaver and Hard Rope to follow, and Custer ordered Black Kettle's village destroyed. Just as some Dog Soldiers wished to eliminate all whites, some whites wished Indians gone from the earth forever. Neither of these extreme positions was achieved but many died in the crossfire.

Military peace accords, often followed by formal government treaties, were important in securing the objectives of a national policy of expansion. Soldiers from Fort Riley assisted in treaty arrangements with many Indian nations. Some agreements were concluded with relative ease, often facilitated by chicanery as in the cases of the Kaws and immigrant Potawatomis, Shawnees, and Delawares. Many Indians in Kansas became US citizens through the treaty process, but others were more resistant to change. These included Cheyennes,

Arapahos, Comanches, and Kiowas. Government negotiators concluded meaningful treaties with these tribes only after many hard-fought military campaigns by Fort Riley soldiers, and



PORTRAIT OF
MAJOR EDWARD WYNKOOP
Louis Kraft 2007

even then peace had its difficulties. After a summer of campaigning by Major General Grenville Dodge and (Brevet) Brigadier General James H. Ford, the succeeding commander of the District of the Upper Arkansas, (Brevet) Major General John B. Sanborn, concluded formal peace accords with several chiefs of the Apaches, Comanches, and Kiowas in August 1865. These negotiations

resulted in formal treaties between these tribes and the US government in October 1865. Additionally, some Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders joined in an agreement signed on March 1, 1866, at Bluff Creek along the South Arkansas River with army officers deployed from Fort Riley. Such accords, reached only after the use of force and threats of further action by units deployed from Fort Riley, helped lay the groundwork for other more formal treaties between Indians and the United States.

Besides peacemaking with various Indian nations, soldiers at Fort Riley provided security, not only for white trails and settlements, but also to those Indians trying to live at peace on established reservations in the Flint Hills. These included principally Kaws who had a reserve near Council Grove and Potawatomis who had a reserve surrounding St. Marys. For example, on June 2, 1870, Ely S. Parker, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote to Secretary of the Interior Jacob D. Cox asking for

army assistance to remove more than fifty trespassers from the Kaw reservation. Parker asked Secretary Cox to advise the president about the matter. The commander at Fort Riley subsequently received orders to evict the trespassers, and the soldiers accomplished this mission by the end of the month. Despite Fort Riley's efforts to control squatters, the situation became unbearable for the Kaws and unenforceable for the troops. In 1873 the Kaws, divided and broken, were removed to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma.

Other policing actions included incarcerating Indian prisoners. Over the years Indians from several tribes were detained at the post, whose facilities were somewhat porous, much to the embarrassment of post officials and the consternation of the local populace. The summer of 1883 alone witnessed escapes by several small groups of Apache and Navajo detainees. The *Solomon Sentinel* raised alarm among the citizenry of the area when it reported how the Apaches

had stolen horses in the vicinity, traded horses with a farmer, and roasted one of the mares before troops recaptured them.

Obviously, Fort Riley soldiers and Indians often fought to each other's detriment, but on many other occasions they worked as armed allies. Many emigrant tribes in eastern Kansas and Nebraska were raided by Indian nations to the west. These aggrieved peoples turned to the US Army at Fort Riley for protection, and many cooperated with the army as scouts against their adversaries. Potawatomis, Kaws, and Delawares, among them Jim Logan, Dog, and Jacob, effectively served with patrolling units from Fort Riley.

Of all the long-standing tribes in the area, the Pawnees developed the most remarkable relationship with the United States Army. Many High Plains Indian nations, especially the Sioux, sought control of the vast bison hunting grounds of the Central High Plains. Pawnees found in the army a sometime effective ally, and both

cultures cooperated in the pursuit of their common enemies. The Pawnee Scouts, as they became known, participated in the Curtis Expedition in Kansas in 1864, the bulk of which was drawn from Fort Riley units, and for a time, a Pawnee battalion served as part of the Fifth US Cavalry, a unit frequently assigned to Fort Riley. These Pawnee soldiers earned a reputation as some of the fiercest fighters on the Plains. Under the leadership of their army commander, Major Frank North, the Pawnee battalion was respected and feared by High Plains Indians. Pawnees were fast friends and allies of the cavalry on the Plains, and they had never been at war with United States. Sadly, in the end, it was the army's inability to protect this tribe in their own reservation villages and bison hunting grounds that eventually led them to relocate to Indian Territory after 1873.

The long-running interaction between the Riley community and the surrounding Indian nations offered

valuable lessons to both sides. Indian horse practices influenced the manner in which soldiers tended their steeds. In winter most Indians camped in riparian woodlands and often fed their horses cottonwood bark and small twigs after nearby grazing grounds were played out. While on winter campaigns, cavalrymen adopted these same practices. Additionally, the army cavalry drill manual contained exercises that directly emulated Indian horse practices on the High Plains. In 1893 Lieutenant H. W. Smith commented on the improvements to the *Cavalry Drill Regulations* (1891) as a result of fighting horse-mounted Indians on the shortgrass prairies. At the cultural crossroads of Fort Riley, Indians and cavalrymen learned from each other.

Indian contact with the soldiers often meant business. In June 1863 a group of approximately one hundred Sauks passed through Fort Riley and Junction City on the way west to hunt bison. This hunting band, so reported the businessmen of the area to the

editor of the *Union*, spent more than three hundred dollars in “greenbacks” before departing. The horse trade was especially important in a cavalry installation. The army had strict regulations about the quality of horses to be purchased and who might serve as suppliers. Most of the cavalry horses at Fort Riley came from Fort Leavenworth and St. Louis. These “American” horses were capable of carrying a 450-pound load. Indian ponies were lighter and normally did not carry as much weight as an army horse, but were useful for other work. In 1891 the army finally sanctioned the purchase of Indian horses—in recognition of actual practice.

The most lucrative form of commerce on post, however, was whiskey. The territorial trade and intercourse acts regulated licensed traders, and one of the main provisos was a total ban on trading whiskey to Indians. Alcohol consumption, however, was by then an irrepressible aspect of American society. In 1855 the officers of Fort

Riley contracted with several Kaws to herd and tend their horses and purportedly paid them in whiskey. The Kaw agent wrote a bitter denunciation of this practice, but whether his letter had any effect is not known. The Kaws consumed some of the whiskey they acquired and wholesaled the rest to the Kiowas and Arapahos.

The post served as more than just a place from which to wage war or to police the Great Plains. Fort Riley was a good place for socializing, as during the last visit of Pawnees in November 1875. In reporting on this grand event, the Junction City *Union* noted:

The Pawnee tribe of Indians, on their way from their old home in Nebraska to their new home in Indian Territory, camped on the Republican River near town Thursday night. The town was full of them Thursday afternoon. A large number of ladies and gentlemen visited their camp Thursday evening, went through their lodges, and inspected Indian life by

camp light.... They moved on Friday, and their march through our main street was a magnificent pageant.

Fort Riley sought to touch and shape, for ill or good, the lives of people far removed from its barracks, mess halls, stables, and armory. Certainly troops and Indians engaged in warfare. But soldiers also engaged in serious peacemaking efforts among Indian nations and occasionally attempted to protect Indian interests. When it suited them, Indian nations allied themselves with the US Army. Together, they created a richly textured community in the Flint Hills.

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James E. Sherow is Professor of American History at Kansas State University and the author of numerous articles and three books about the American West. His forthcoming books include a re-photography study of Alexander Gardner's 1867 photograph of Kansas with John Charlton and a pictorial history of Manhattan. His current research project is a co-authored history of a Southern Cheyenne family in the twentieth century.