

REMINISCENCES

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AS personal experiences will enter largely into the make up of this paper, I will necessarily lay myself open to the charge of egotism, but I desire to disclaim at the start any such motive, and present my recollections in the hope that they may recall to the older readers of the *JOURNAL* similar scenes, and convey to the minds of the younger officers an idea of what the cavalry service was on the Plains thirty years ago, under conditions that can never exist again.

The time was when the favorite weapon of the cavalryman was the sword; when the campaign, the scout, the affray, the chase, the long dreary march through blinding sands and scorching sun, over barren wastes of sage brush, cactus and mesquite, taught him fortitude; constantly in danger of a shot from a lurking savage foe, often without food or water, caring little where night overtook him, deprived of all the refining influences and comforts of home, shut off from the pleasures and benefits of civilized life, disregarding considerations of personal comforts, constantly carrying his life in his hands, always on the alert, cemented to his comrades in arms by a friendship that can only be formed in the school of privation and danger, with "*semper paratus*" for his motto, the bold sabreur of early days was the beau ideal of a soldier. Lucky was he, if, in the midst of his active life, he gained a few months rest during the winter. Field service was the rule, garrison life the exception. But all these have passed away, and have, under the enervating times of peace, been replaced by lyceums, essay writing, schools and books. From the present trend of military affairs we are forced to the conclusion that the sword is no longer the weapon of success, but that the pen has opened up the royal road to military honor and preferment. Our biblical friend, JOB, was evidently in error when he wished to punish his enemies by having them write books, or else conditions have mightily changed since then.

During the time of which I speak but few officers were married; now bachelors are the exception, and it is not much wonder that the old Irish captain, when reflecting upon the changed conditions of things, exclaimed: "I have little use for the modern

second lieutenant; he reports for duty with a bride on his arm and an application for a school detail in his hand."

Like many young men, who passed through the exciting scenes of the Civil War in the volunteer service, I returned to my home in a condition of unrest, and with a feeling of doubt as to the future. My life plans had been broken up; the prospect of settling down to study, or devoting myself to business was distasteful to me, resulting finally in my acceptance of a commission as second lieutenant in the Seventh Cavalry. Having passed my examination, I joined my regiment, then being organized at Fort Riley, Kansas, in December, 1866. A number of the troops had already been organized and sent to the more remote posts of Harker, Hays, Wallace, Dodge, Lyon and Morgan. The Kansas Pacific, now the Union Pacific Railroad, had been completed as far as Junction City, and most of the grading had been done as far west as Fort Harker. The overland stage lines to Denver, Colorado, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, were protected by two lines of posts, one on the Smoky Hill River, the other on the Arkansas River. These posts, seven in number were all of a temporary character, rudely constructed of cottonwood logs and rough lumber, and at some of them, particularly Fort Dodge, the officers and men lived in dugouts, with dirt coverings and no floors except what the earth furnished. The comforts now enjoyed by the troops were not dreamed of in those days. Temporary bunks with pole or board slats, supplied with a straw tick, empty boxes, cross sections of cottonwood logs, and empty barrels with the sides cut out and stuffed with hay, made up the sum total of barrack room furniture; tallow dips supplied the illumination; the clothing was poor in quality and often deficient in quantity; the rations were meagre, and as a rule, much deteriorated from lack of proper storage facilities; the Subsistence Department did not furnish the delicacies such as canned vegetables, fruits and meats that it now supplies, and the few articles of this kind that could be procured were gotten through the post trader at the most exorbitant prices—prices almost prohibitive to the enlisted men.

The personnel of the army at that time also differed very much from what it is now, and was by no means satisfactory from the standpoint of discipline. All the officers and a majority of the men had served during the war, many of the latter on the Confederate side. These, upon returning to their homes after the surrender had found all their earthly possessions swept away, and nothing was left for them but to seek new fields for their energies. Many from the Union side were induced to enter the service from love of adventure, or the hope of advancement. They were a fearless, yet restless and turbulent lot of fellows, and yielded reluctantly to the discipline imposed upon them by their new environments. Chafing under this new restraint, and rendered dissatisfied by the many hardships they were called upon to endure, desertions became alarmingly prevalent.

The vast undeveloped empire lying between Fort Riley, Denver, the Platte River and Red River, was completely dominated by the powerful tribes of Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Kiowas and Lipans. Their subsistence was furnished by the innumerable herds of buffaloes that roamed over these Plains. Across the home and hunting grounds of these Indians passed annually hundreds of trains laden with provisions and

other necessaries of life for the hardy pioneer of the mineral regions of the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast, as well as emigrant trains, carrying the families and earthly possessions of men seeking homes in the far, unknown West. How many of them failed to reach their destination was sadly manifested by the numerous neglected graves scattered along the dreary overland highways, lured to their death by the deceptive mirage, or ambushed by bloodthirsty and relentless savages. These Indians for some time had been restless and had threatened hostilities, due to the rapid advancement of white settlements and the building of railroads across their favorite hunting grounds. To hold them in check, and to afford protection to the settlements and the builders of the roads, was the purpose of sending the newly organized cavalry regiments into this region. A suspicious circumstance connected with the Indians was their urgent demands upon the government for arms and ammunition. They had not then discarded the bow and arrow as a weapon of war, and improved firearms could not be so readily procured as in later years. Every concession on the part of the government was regarded by them as an evidence of fear, and only served to make them more arrogant and aggressive. Such was the situation when, about March 12, 1867, I was ordered to proceed to Fort Wallace with a detachment of recruits for my troop, "I," Brevet Colonel KEOGH, captain. My first march was to Chapman Creek. Shortly after dark I made an inspection of my camp and found to my astonishment that about half my men had taken their revolvers and gone away, and, as I supposed, deserted. I spent a sleepless night in consequence. Fortunately the horses were all present. I anticipated having to continue my march the next day with half my command, but to my surprise the missing men were all present at reveille. They had returned on foot to Junction City to have a night of it, and had walked in all about twenty-five miles. We reached Harker, and proceeded thence to old Fort Hays, located eighteen miles southeast of where the new post of that name was built that year. Here we began to receive rumors of Indians, and it became necessary to exercise the greatest vigilance. My command consisted of twenty-five men, and all, like myself, totally inexperienced in Indian warfare. On the evening of the first day out from Fort Hays, and just as we were going into camp, a small herd of buffaloes was seen grazing on the south side of the Smoky Hill River, and seemed, to my inexperienced eye, to be about a mile away. After giving orders for the night, I crossed the river and started for my maiden buffalo hunt. I fully expected to be on them in a little while, but after riding for half an hour at a good gait, they seemed as far away as at the start. I quickened my pace and in another twenty minutes I had reached a point close enough to make the run. I singled out a young bull, and, after firing several shots at him, brought him to bay, but, unfortunately for me, my horse was so frightened that he lost his head and resisted all the argument I could present with my spurs. I saw by the flashing, angry eyes of the buffalo that he would be upon me in a few seconds, but the horse could not be moved from where he was, apparently rooted to the ground. I saw with dread the charge of the furious beast, and, with all my strength, managed to turn the horse so that he would receive the shock from the rear. The blow was so great that the horse was tossed for several feet and, suddenly realizing the danger of his position, made off at

full speed. I was thrown out of the saddle by the shock and found myself sitting on the horse's rump, holding on to the cantle. While the horse was running I managed to regain my seat and get him under control. The shots I had given the bull proved fatal, and when I returned to the scene of the exciting conflict he was dead. In the excitement of the chase I had lost all record of distance and direction, and it was not till 9 o'clock at night that I caught sight of the fire the men had lighted to guide me back to camp. The next day's march brought us into countless herds of these shaggy beasts, grazing in the valley of the Smoky Hill River, and covering the plain north and south of the river as far as the eye could reach. For three consecutive days and for a distance of seventy-five miles we marched through these herds. The river at this point was very shallow and sluggish, and we camped each night on or near its banks, drinking the water that was a mixture of alkali and filth.

One night my tents were pitched with their backs on the edge of a steep bank devoid of trees or brush. The common tent used for cooking and storage of my rations was only a few feet from the wall tent in which I slept. I arose in the morning expecting to find my breakfast in course of preparation, when I was informed by the cook that all the rations had disappeared. As we had been treated to a vigorous serenade by the wolves during the night, I at once charged the theft to them, but I soon realized the propriety of the man's suggestion that the wolves would not carry off the sacks containing the flour, sugar and coffee. Upon making an examination of the premises I found numerous moccasin [sic] tracks in the sand on the river bank. The Indians had stealthily crept up under the bank during the night, raised the back of the tent and stolen everything I had to eat, within a few feet of where I slept. I did not pitch my tents so near the bank again.

I arrived at Fort Wallace early in April and served there till the following November. The garrison was made up of Troop "I," Seventh Cavalry, Brevet Colonel KEOGH, captain, commanding troop and post; Company "E," Third Infantry, Lieutenant JOSEPH HALL, now captain, commanding, and Company "D," Thirty-seventh Infantry, Lieutenant D. MORTIMER LEE, now retired, commanding. Lieutenant BEECHER, who was killed [while] with General FORSYTH the following summer, was on duty at the post. WILLIAM COMSTOCK, who was also killed by Indians the following year, was the scout and interpreter, and one of the most valuable men I have ever known in that capacity. Shortly after my arrival, Company "D," Thirty-Seventh Infantry, was ordered to New Mexico. The construction of a permanent post had been begun, the work being done mostly by the labor of troops. The material used was a very soft magnesian limestone, found in that vicinity; the only tools necessary were cross-cut saws and jack planes. The dust formed by shaping the stones made an excellent cement for laying the walls.

On account of the threatening attitude of the Indians an expedition was prepared at Fort Riley under command of General HANCOCK, Department Commander, and left that post on March 27, 1867, its destination being a large camp of Cheyennes, located on Pawnee Fork, not far from Fort Larned. The purpose of the expedition was, if possible, to compel the Indians to go upon their reservation and observe treaty

stipulations, or fight them if they refused. A point three miles from the camp was reached on April 14th, a council was held that afternoon with the chief men, and an agreement made for a general council the following day. The Indians, as usual, were full of promises; but General HANCOCK found, much to his surprise the next morning, that the Indians had fled precipitately during the night, leaving their lodges and entire camp outfit on the grounds. Everything was at once destroyed, and CUSTER was ordered to follow the fleeing Indians with all the mounted force—eight troops of the Seventh Cavalry. Here began the war of 1867, 1868 and 1869. The Indians fled in a northwesterly direction towards the Platte River, and in crossing the Smoky Hill Stage Line, destroyed a number of stations, killed the keepers and stole the horses. These relay stations were situated from ten to fifteen miles apart; two relays of horses were kept at each and two men were employed to take care of and guard them. Early in June a band of Cheyennes, numbering about 300 bucks, and known as the Dog Soldiers, under the leadership of ROMAN NOSE, a bold and intrepid warrior, made a persistent and successful effort to destroy this line. Troop "F," Seventh Cavalry, had been detached from CUSTER'S command to act as escort to trains and stages between Russell Springs and Chalk Bluffs, and on June 8th had an engagement with this band at the latter place. The Indians were so active and persistent, however, that nearly all the stations were destroyed, horses stolen and keepers killed for a distance of 150 miles east and west of Wallace, so that it became necessary for a time to haul the stages over this part of the route with government mules. Two coaches were run together, one carrying the passengers and mail, the other an escort of soldiers. About June 15th an attack was made upon one of these parties near Big Timbers, twenty miles west of Wallace, resulting in the death of two passengers and two of the escort. General HANCOCK about this time decided to make a personal inspection of the situation, and reached Wallace about June 20th, on his way to Denver, taking with him as escort Colonel KEOGH and forty men of his troop, leaving a garrison of about sixty men. ROMAN NOSE was not long in discovering the depleted condition of the garrison, and on the morning of the 22^d he paid his respects to the post in a particularly vigorous manner with his band of 300 warriors. They first attacked the stone train, on its morning trip to the quarries, three miles east of the post, killing [sic] several of the drivers and captured a number of mules.

They then made a determined assault upon the garrison, but were finally repulsed with considerable loss, and driven to a ridge about a mile north of the post. The small cavalry force, about twenty-five men, supported by what infantry could be safely spared from the post, pursued them and drove them still further north, the troops occupying the ridge previously held by the Indians. There was temporarily at post a detachment of a sergeant and six men of the Thirty-eighth Infantry (colored). While the fight was in progress I saw this detachment coming from the direction of the garrison in a wagon as fast as the mules could carry them and, upon their arrival, I directed them to deploy on the right of the skirmish line, where they immediately went into action. In a few minutes I observed that one of these men had separated himself from the others by a considerable distance, exposing himself to a heavy fire from the Indians, but before I

could order him back to his proper place I saw him fall and throw his legs about in an agonizing manner. I thought of course he was killed, and when the Indians finally withdrew beyond the range of our guns and the men were assembled, I directed the sergeant to take his wagon and bring in the dead darky, but just then, to my surprise, I saw the fellow get up and walk leisurely towards us, with his gun on his shoulder. As he came up I said, "Are you not shot?" He replied with a grin that absorbed his whole countenance, "No sah, Mr. Lieutenant, I's all right." I replied, "Why I saw you fall and throw your legs and arms in the air, and thought you had been killed; what in the devil do you mean by doing such a thing?" To which he replied, "Golly, Mr. Lieutenant, I jist did dat to fool 'em; I tot dey would tink I was shot, and when dey come to get my scalp I'd git one ob dairs." While it was a foolhardy and dangerous piece of strategy, I could not help admiring the fellow's nerve.

On the 26th of June a surveying party of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, under the direction of General W. W. WRIGHT, arrived at the post, running a line to the Pacific Coast. They were escorted by Troop "G," Seventh Cavalry, Brevet Colonel BARNITZ, retired for wounds received in the battle of the Washita the following year, commanding. On the following morning, the 27th, ROMAN NOSE again paid us a visit; the attack was made just at dawn of day, and in a more vigorous and determined manner than the previous one, but was driven off after a severe conflict, in which six men were killed and as many wounded. The Indians also lost heavily. The day following, ten miles north of Wallace, they attempted to capture a train escorted by Troop "A," Seventh Cavalry, carrying supplies to CUSTER'S command, but were again repulsed with some loss.

CUSTER, having failed to find the Cheyennes who had fled from Pawnee Fork, went to Fort Sedgwick, on the Platte River, for supplies, and, after resting a day or two, started across country to Wallace. When about midway, he discovered an Indian trail leading westward, which he followed. The day after his departure from Sedgwick, General SHERMAN arrived at that post, and wishing to communicate with CUSTER, sent Lieutenant KIDDER, of the Second Cavalry, with thirteen men and Indian Scout RED JACKET, to carry his dispatches. To avoid being seen, the detachment marched at night, and for this reason failed to discover the sharp turn made by CUSTER'S trail to the westward, and while searching for the lost trail by daylight, was discovered by a band of Indians under the leadership of PAWNEE KILLER. After a desperate struggle the entire party was killed, RED JACKET being the last to fall. In this fight the Indians lost more than man for man. The dead and horribly mutilated bodies were found a day or two later by CUSTER'S command on his way to Wallace.

Early in July a battalion of the Fifth Infantry reached Wallace on its way from New Mexico, Brevet Brigadier-General BANKHEAD, commanding. It had not been in camp but a day or two when the cholera made its appearance, a number of deaths resulting. The only woman with the command was the wife of General BANKHEAD who fell a victim to the disease. A few days later General CUSTER arrived, and had no sooner made his camp than the terrible scourge broke out in his command. The men, much reduced by hard marches and improper food, rapidly yielded to its fatal

influences. While CUSTER'S command was scouting the country north of Wallace, there was so much dissatisfaction on account of the wretched quality of the rations that the men began to desert in squads, taking their horses and arms with them. The evil was so threatening that the severest measures had to be resorted to. At one of the camps a squad of men left, mounted and armed, in broad daylight. Lieutenants COOK and CUSTER were sent in pursuit with a detachment of men. The deserters were overtaken some distance from camp, a fight ensued, the horses and arms were brought back, but the men were never seen thereafter. A wholesome check was put upon desertion in that command. CUSTER was severely censured for administering such summary punishment, but I think he was justified by the circumstances.

A striking example of the wholesale desertions of that period occurred at Fort Morgan, on the South Platte, in January, 1867. The post was garrisoned by Troop "L," Seventh Cavalry, Brevet Colonel MICHAEL SHERIDAN, now of the Adjutant-General's Department, captain. Shortly after tattoo one evening the first sergeant entered the barracks and ordered the troop to prepare at once for field service. Forty men of the troop were quietly formed and marched out of the post without the knowledge of Colonel SHERIDAN, who was the only officer present. The detachment continued its march as an organization to within a few miles of Pueblo, when the first sergeant coolly informed the men that they were deserters, and that every man must look out for himself. I was at Fort Riley at this time, from which place Lieutenant ABELL, who had been assigned to SHERIDAN'S troop, was ordered to conduct a detachment of forty recruits to Fort Morgan, to replace the deserters. He was ordered to proceed across the country to Fort McPherson and thence up the Platte River to Morgan. A few days out from Riley he was overtaken by a terrific snow storm, which stampeded and demoralized his command so completely that he had only one man left when he arrived at McPherson, and he was only saved by being so badly frozen that he could not desert. This solitary remnant of the command was placed in the hospital, and ABELL reported to his post with nothing but his personal effects and the descriptive lists of his detachment.

Early in July General HANCOCK returned to Wallace from his trip westward, and directed that an effort be made to reestablish the stage line. That part of the line west of the post fell to my lot. Pond Creek Station, three miles west of Wallace, had not been burned. Upon my arrival there with my detachment I found the place deserted, the horses and men nowhere to be found. Search was made, and the dead bodies of the two keepers were found in a Buffalo wallow about a mile north of the station. The horses had been driven off while out grazing; the men had gone to search for them and had been surrounded and killed by the Indians. They had made a hard struggle for their lives, as was shown by the pile of empty shells, but they were too far from the fort for the firing to be heard; the assistance the poor fellows so anxiously looked and hoped for never came, and the Indians added two more to their long list of victims of that fatal summer. I was directed to place at each station a guard of a non-commissioned officer and three men, and to provide them with means of defense. For this purpose circular pits were dug in the ground about ten feet in diameter, just deep enough so that a man

standing in them could comfortably aim ever the top. Around the edge of this pit was built a heavy wall of sod, pierced at intervals with loopholes. Across this was laid a frame of logs and brush, on top of which was placed a heavy covering of earth. These little underground forts were connected with the buildings by a subterranean passage, and were supplied with a barrel of water, ten days' rations, and a supply of ammunition, to serve in case of siege, or the destruction of the building by fire. After completing this duty I sent my transportation and escort back to Wallace, and went on to Denver for a few days. Upon the day of our arrival the Indians attacked a large ox train thirty miles east of the town, and had only abandoned their efforts to capture it a short while before our arrival at that point. As the driver and I were the only occupants of the stage, we congratulated ourselves on our narrow escape. The people of Denver, including the stage officials were badly stampeded, and it was with difficulty that I persuaded them to send out a stage to take me back to my post. Passengers could not be induced to take the chances of the trip, so the driver, one man employed as mail guard, and myself, started on our journey, uncertain as to what the outcome would be. The country was full of Indians, and it would be an extraordinary piece of good luck if we succeeded in getting through without encountering them. Thus we three traveled for 140 miles, when to my delight, I found three men of my troop at one of the stations, who had been sent out as guard to a west bound coach. At the next station I found one of the guards sick with fever. I placed him on a bed spread for him on the top of the coach. The day was perfect and we congratulated ourselves that so far we were all right. We reached Cheyenne Wells a short while before noon, and stopped to get dinner and rest our tired team. The buildings here had not been burned, although several attempts to do so had been made. The wife of the station keeper had been with him through the trying experience of the summer and, being anxious to get out of the country, begged me to let her go with us. I told her she could go if she was willing to take the chances, which she decided to do. All went well till we reached a point midway between Cheyenne Wells and the next station, Big Timbers. At this point the trail crossed a dry fork of the Smoky Hill River. The animals were tired, and while they were slowly dragging the stage through the deep sand of the creek bed, we were startled by a heavy volley fired into us by a band of twenty-five Indians, concealed under a steep bank seventy-five yards away. The stage was riddled with bullets, the glass lamps at the driver's feet broken into a hundred pieces, and it was as if by a miracle that any of the party escaped instant death. A number of the shots passed through the top of the stage, scattering the splinters about the woman and me. The three men of my troop were sitting on the top of the stage where the sick man was lying. We seized our Spencer rifles and returned a rapid fire. As we reached the opposite bank of the creek I called to the men to jump to the ground and, seizing the woman, forced her to the floor of the stage, telling her not to move, knowing that if the Indians saw her they would have an additional motive in capturing the stage, and also that the heavy frame work would be a protection to her. I hastily opened the door to get out and while doing so the sick man swung himself from the top of the stage, down through the opening of the door, and as he did so said, "I am killed," and began to

deliver to me his dying message to his mother but there was no time even to listen to such a sad message, for the lives of the entire party were trembling in the balance. We had now reached ground high enough to see that our fire had been effective, and observed the Indians placing the bodies of two dead warriors on their ponies. Those of their party not thus occupied had left their place of concealment and were rapidly riding around our flanks to cut off our line of march. The country was much broken and traversed by ravines. In these they concealed themselves and opened fire upon us as we approached. Fortunately a third Indian was killed who had ventured too close to our trail, but nevertheless, they kept up the fight for two hours over a distance of more than five miles. Several of our animals were badly wounded, but were fortunately able to keep going till we reached Big Timbers. When the attack was made, seeing how greatly we were outnumbered, none of us entertained the slightest hope that we could by any possibility escape, and we made up our minds to sell our lives as dearly as possible. It was the only time in my life that I experienced the feeling of absolute hopelessness, and I trust I may never be called upon to undergo it again. When we had descended from the high rolling ground into the valley of Big Timbers and about a thousand yards from the station, the Indians gave up the fight, and watched us from a bluff on which they had assembled. I never in my life was so glad to reach any place as that station.

When we stopped I went to the stage, opened the door, and told the woman that she could now get out. She arose from her prone position and, as she stepped from the stage, remarked, "But I have not seen the Indians yet." I pointed to where they had assembled and told her to gratify her commendable curiosity. She did not seem to be in the least disturbed or excited by the trying experiences through which she had just passed, and related to me in her impressive manner the trials she had been subjected to in the coach for the two hours she had been lying on the floor. The wounded man had laid down on the back seat and in a few minutes was dead. Every time the stage struck a depression on the trail the dead body would roll off the seat on top of the crouching woman, and it required all her strength to force it back upon the seat. While she was having this ghastly experience she could hear the firing going on outside, not knowing what moment the stage would be captured, subjecting her to a fate worse than death. I listened to her recital with perfect amazement. She showed not the slightest evidence of nervousness or trepidation, and when she had finished her story, I exclaimed: "By Jove, you are a rare specimen; you certainly deserve a chromo."

We proceeded on our journey to Wallace; a distance of twenty-eight miles, without further molestation, the rough and dangerous parts being traversed on foot. This was truly an eventful summer for the troops serving at Wallace. Not a pound of fresh beef was supplied by the Subsistence Department; the rations on hand had been sent there for the use of the volunteer troops in 1865 and were not fit for human food. Buffaloes were to be found within fifteen or twenty miles of the post, but being unsafe to send out small hunting parties, it was rarely that sufficient men could be spared for a force large enough to make it safe, so we usually were without fresh meat of any kind, and were very much in the condition of the troops of the old German captain, who,

complaining of the manner in which his troops had subsisted during a long tour of field service, remarked: "My men they don't had any fresh beef for six weeks exceptin' tree ducks." We did occasionally get a stray duck from the pond near the post. For three months no man's life was safe a half mile from the garrison, and during that time we were practically in a state of siege. At the time of my arrival, in April, no graves had been dug in the grounds set aside for the post cemetery, and at my departure, in November of the same year, sixty mounds marked the final resting place of the victims of cholera and Indians, divided about equally between the two. I was not sorry when in November an order came appointing me quartermaster of my regiment, headquarters Fort Leavenworth, and I sang with a light heart:

"Oh, Smoky Hill, my Smoky Hill.
The day has come when we must part,
And candor bids me freely own,
How few regrets oppress my heart."