

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #44 - Side A

Subject: Camp Harney (Ralph Dickenson)

Place:

Date: November 13, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

(Note: Although common usage refers to Camp Harney as "Fort", it was actually only a Camp.)

This is Pauline Braymen. I interviewed Ralph Dickenson in Burns on November the 13th, 1972. Ralph has been making a study of Fort Harney for some years now, and has quite a bit of detailed information about the Fort, which he will make available to this project. He told me a few things that he had found out, and what he is attempting to do now is to track down information about the people who were at Fort Harney.

He has done quite a bit of study about a man by the name of Charles Bendire, B E N D I R E. It seems that Bendire Mountain, that people at Drewsey talk about, was named for this man. He was stationed at Fort Harney and was a naturalist. Did a lot of study on birds, and wrote several books. Later went on to work at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

Another one that Ralph is looking into now is a Captain David Perry who was commander at Fort Harney, and was quite an Indian fighter. He took Captain Jack, and was involved in the hunts for Chief Joseph. Ralph has found that some of Custer's officers that were with him at the Little Big Horn had been stationed at Fort Harney at one

time or another. And he is seeking information along these lines.

Fort Harney was in operation for 13 years. Ralph has information from the Surgeon General, United States Surgeon General, about the diseases that were common there, such as consumption, remittent fever and inter-remittent fever, typhoid fever, and other diseases of this type. Rheumatism, pneumonia, pleurisy and diarrhea was quite common. However, deaths listed at Fort Harney during the period that he has this report were quite few, in fact only one death was recorded and in 1872 and '73. There was one gunshot wound recorded.

Most of the duty at Fort Harney was garrison duty. They were never under siege by the Indians. The only time that there was even any danger of being under siege was in 1878 in the peak of the Bannock Indian War.

They had a regimental band of about 77 men stationed there, and in 1878 had their most men stationed there, with 300 men, infantry, Cavalry, and artillery. This was the largest amount of men, mostly run around 70.

They had a commissary, and a hospital, and in 1878 there was some discussion as to whether they should establish a school or not. They had a bakery.

The officer's quarters were four log buildings and two frame houses. The buildings were 32' x 42' and were divided by a hall. There were four rooms on each side. They were one story high. At the time the report was made, the reporter indicated that they were once neatly finished, but now in bad need of repair.

The quarters for the enlisted men were three buildings, 30' x 100' built of un-hewn logs and warmed by a large stove.

All timber for the building of Fort Harney came from the north in a canyon beyond where there was a sawmill, and this was Robie's Sawmill. And there was green lumber.

When the soldiers rode out in 1880 and abandoned the Fort, the settlers carted off the lumber to build their own, for their own use.

Ralph also has some weather information. In 1872 the coldest temperature was 8 below, and the hottest temperature was 100 degrees. Two below was the coldest temperature recorded in 1873. Reports indicated that during the winter, Fort Harney was completely isolated by snow. And that the nearest railroad was Winnemucca in 1875. In the wintertime the only way of travel out of the valley was by snowshoes.

Department headquarters were in Portland and it took mail ten to fourteen days to reach Portland. And about a month to Washington. Which, under the circumstances doesn't sound unreasonably slow.

Ralph doesn't think there were really a lot of Indians in Harney County during the Fort Harney period. Fort Harney was used as a base in August 1867 against the Steens Indians.

Another fellow that was there was E. S. Wood, who later became a lawyer, and a painter, and poet, and wrote a diary during the Bannock War.

They took soldiers who were given a penitentiary sentence to Alcatraz. But the Fort was never under siege and actually Ralph says that when you get all the facts down why it was really pretty dull going. Not too exciting duty.

One interesting thing that he has found though in his research is that evidently the sole purpose of these scouting troops through Harney County was, in this area, was to seek out and kill all the male Indians that they could. One report the Secretary of War that he has indicated that they killed the "male bucks" and took prisoners of the children. One of the reports read something like this: Came upon one buck, and one squaw, and two children. Killed the buck, took the woman, the squaw, and children prisoner.

I feel that since Ralph is willing to make this information available, that at a later date I will go back with plans to write a detailed report on Fort Harney from the material that he has.

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