

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #62 - Side A

Subject: Camp Harney - Speech by Ralph Dickenson

Place: Harney County Historical Society - Burns, Oregon

Date: 1978

Interviewer:

RALPH DICKENSON: ... visiting about Camp Harney or anything else, with a group this size. If I'd have know that you had been doing the kind of job that you had been doing in your membership drive, I'm not so sure that I would have come. I hope that possibly today we could talk about some things that you may not be aware of. I'm not at all sure if that would be true. I think that one of the things in doing research at any time, but particularly of historical matters like this where there --- well, you know, I talked a few years ago to Mrs. Luckey. I was most interested in talking with her because, of course, she was born at Camp Harney. And after we had talked a little while she said, "You know, I just can't help you at all, I'm too young." That hasn't occurred too many years ago. That seems to be the case. There is no one around. It's a shame that we don't take an interest, I guess, in these things when there are people to talk to, and people avail-able.

One of the things that I found when I started researching Camp Harney was that there seems to be a great difference of opinion to many things, when the camp started, for one. And I think you can find as many dates given for the establishment, or original establishment of Camp Harney, as there are writers. I am comfort-able with a date. And I'd like to start, if I might this after-noon, by reading you an excerpt from their very first monthly report from Camp Harney, which at that time was Camp Steele. And it's the post return, under the remarks at the bottom. It is dated August 1867, Camp Steele, Oregon.

And it says, "Company K 23rd Infantry marched on the 16th of August, 1867 from Camp Wright and established Camp Steele on Rattlesnake Creek, Oregon, 60 miles to Canyon City, and about 250 miles southeast from The Dalles. In obedience to verbal instructions received from Major General George Crook, commanding officer of the District of Owyhee."

This was a report issued by the very first commander, post commander, from Camp Harney. It was a Lieutenant Goodale of that 23rd Infantry. I think that that's a date as far as the establishment of the Camp is concerned, that we can be comfortable with.

Of course Camp Harney, as the lake and the county that we live in, was named after William S. Harney, who was a Tennessean who came to this country after service in the Blackhawk War in '33, and on down through the Army. And worked his way finally to the District of Oregon as a commander of this particular area. He wasn't a very a distinguished officer, and sometimes when I think about Harney County and the great county this is, being named after that particular individual, I have some doubt, but it really doesn't matter.

Camp Harney was first --- just a little speculation; and there's no way to know for sure, but I think that maybe we might believe that Camp Harney was located where it was because of the availability of the good grass for the stock in those lush meadows that run up along the creek, and the availability of year round water supply. At any rate George Crook was in that particular area in '64, in reconnaissance with the Army, and he camped and he named his temporary camp, Rattlesnake Camp. In '67 when they decided, or he decided, to form a permanent camp, a winter camp, in this part of the state, he chose that particular site. It went through an evolution of names, the original one, Rattlesnake Camp; then it was Camp Steele, and Camp Crook, and finally Camp Harney.

One thing about, another thing about Camp Harney is the fact that we often read of

Fort Harney, which it never was. It was always a camp; it was never a fortress. Going back just a little bit to the possibility of the, Crook's selection of that site, it is to some extent a natural fortress in so much as the mountains on both sides are precipitous. The one end, at least that you can see, people coming for --- you could see anyone coming for a good number of miles. That's speculation that can't be proved.

I've read, as I'm sure you have, that, the varying reports of the size of Camp Harney. I think it was Archie McGowan who once wrote in a little paper that he had that there never were very many buildings at Fort Harney. And I think that those of you who have seen the photograph, and as near as I know, I may be wrong, but as near as I know there is only one in existence and I think that you have it up at the museum, do you not? Do you know if Bill has a photograph hanging up there?

As examination of that photograph would show there were quite a few buildings around there. And from a report in 1875, a hygiene report of the U. S. Army that was conducted, a survey, there appears to have been in excess of thirty buildings in that area.

I never thought to prepare a plot. And I don't know if any of you have ever seen a plot of Fort Harney or not, and if you would like to, I picked up a piece of paper on the way in and I thought that possibly I would show you the arrangement of the camp. Can you all see this?

The parade ground, of course, sat in the middle, this being the north end, with the Rattlesnake Creek here. At the north end was the headquarters building; and at the extreme opposite end of that parade ground sat their guardhouse, which reports indicate generally averaged about five people. So they had a few problems there too, I guess. On each side of the parade ground were the barracks for the enlisted men. And there were three of them; they were log buildings. Each had a mess hall, kitchen attached to the back, and the toilets for the men were across Rattlesnake Creek on the east side. This

being the east side. In this area there were two frame, and four log buildings for the enlisted married soldiers. They, I'm sorry; here there was a camp bakery at Camp Harney too, which was something that I found kind of strange. This came from a report of 1875. What was actually there later, I don't know. The hospital was one of the first buildings built, and I've never been able to tell, I've never been able to find any exact documentation as to when these different buildings were erected. But the hospital was built in 1867, the same year that the fort was established. And it set on a knoll; the knoll, I'm sorry, at the northwest corner of that piece of ground. There was a commissary storehouse here, and a quartermaster building there, and they were both log buildings.

The officer's quarters, again, were on this side and they were the same in number as the married men's quarters here. There were six of them. Four of them were log construction, and two of them were frame construction. This report indicated that the buildings, which were made out of logs, were relatively warm, but the frame buildings were terribly cold in the wintertime. The general condition of these buildings at the time of this report was disrepair. The boards were rotted out, and the roofs were all leaking, and needed new ones. There were two stables in this area to accommodate seventy-five animals each. The picture, and I'm not sure of the date on the picture that you people have, but it shows some more buildings in this area, and right in here, and a few buildings right back here.

There is indicated on the plot I've seen, a schoolhouse in this area. And that was in 1872, and this same report indicated that Fort Harney at this time in 1875, there were no chapels, schoolhouse, or laundry. So if that was the case that there was a school, it came later than this.

I know that, I believe Bill obtained the letters that you have in your collection, for this society. That's excellent material. And in some of those letters it speaks of a conflict

between an officer who was in charge of the camp by the name of Hunt and an enlisted man by the name of Randall. And it started out as a quarrel over orders; the enlisted man claimed abuse and they carried it to the commander in Portland. But, down through this argument they got into schools. And --- they had quite a debate over whether or not to establish a school. And at this time they didn't feel that there were enough students or the availability of anyone to teach them. As I say, I haven't been able to find any-thing to the contrary of that.

Of course the lumber came from the sawmill, to regress just a bit, this same plot shows a sawmill south of the camp, and towards the valley. And I think that we can all be sure that that sawmill was north, it was Robie's Sawmill. And I'm sure, we can all be sure that it was in the hills there, north of Camp Harney. Again I can't prove that. This report indicated in was north, but that's not really conclusive.

I found one other thing that interested me, that in 1874, the first post office was established; the post office was established at Camp Harney. And then, of course, when that camp was gone, according to this report, it was moved on down to Harney City. At that time the mail; again referring to this report, the mail took thirteen days to go to The Dalles, and a month to go to Washington, D. C. The report also indicated that in the wintertime you were just there. There wasn't any getting any, any getting out, unless it was by snowshoe. That there was no stage route, or stage service, and that if you got out in the summer you went by private conveyance.

The troops at Camp Harney generally were simply on garrison duty. There really wasn't very much to do at Camp Harney. There were, of course, a few exceptions. But most of the time they were just around camp, or on training type maneuvers. They had a, also had on the west side of the area that I showed you here, a firing range where they practiced against a hill. There was, in some of the accounts that I read, there was quite a

bit of complaint by the soldiers. Of course, they were stuck out here. At that time there wasn't anything else here. And, the trip away from here was time consuming, so they pretty much just lived and died right there in that particular area. There are some exceptions. And I'd like to talk about some people, in just a minute, later. I'm sorry; I'm dwelling too long here.

QUESTION: What were the exceptions?

RALPH: One of the exceptions to the duty at Camp Harney was the Bannock War of '78, which set this whole country on its ear. When the Bannocks came down from Idaho, came across through, picked up the stragglers Paiutes that they didn't pick up down on the Steens Mountains; routed Pete French and some of the other settlers down in that area; and chased them, or followed them at least, whichever would be correct, towards Camp Harney. The camp was then used to a great degree. There were ordinarily two Companies, an Infantry Company and a Cavalry Company at Camp Harney. And it was either an Infantry Camp or a Cavalry Camp, depending on who happened to be in command at that post at that time. And it changed, one year it would be a Cavalry commander, and the next possibly an Infantry. But at the time of the Bannock War, there was everything out there. And I've seen reports that indicated three, three hundred and fifty men strong. And there were artillery divisions, transportation, single corps; the whole works was out there during that Bannock War. So that was, that probably kind of filled some of the dead spots with those people who were there all the time, I suppose, a little excitement.

But the post never was under siege that I've been able to find. The nearest it came was like I said was when the Bannocks were there.

The post, of course, was disbanded in June 13th, 1880. And the buildings and the lumber around there apparently disappeared pretty quickly. The settlers used them for

different purposes. As I had never paid too much attention to what happened to the sawmill, but it seems that I read somewhere that Robie did sell lumber around to Pete French and other people. And whether he stayed there or not, I don't have any idea. But at least in 1884, the post was disbanded.

I'd like to --- Something that interests me very greatly, and as a matter of fact I had almost quit researching Camp Harney, not forever, but for the time being, because of some of the people that were out there, who were fascinating people. It was kind of a forerunner of today, I guess. You know, these people in Harney County are the greatest people around, I think. And it wasn't much different; there was some really great people out there. One that I'm sure Mr. Mazzoni is well acquainted with is Charles Bendire, as possibly many of the rest of you are. But he was the first individual to do extensive research on the bird life in this part of the United States. And a great deal of the research that he did on birds and egg collections that he put together were done right down there where the refuge is now. It indicates that he spent many hours in his spare time right on the lakes observing the birds, and reporting their actions, and collecting the eggs from them. It's very interesting. He was probably the most famous individual that was at Harney. Probably the most infamous if you want to look at it, that was Marcus Reno. Who, some historians would have you believe, that if he had got across the river, he might have saved Custer's tail. He didn't and that's history, of course. But he did some service at Camp Harney.

Of course Thomas Whiting, who was Mrs. Luckey's father, came there in 1874. There were quite a few, I'm going to have to guess, and I shouldn't, but my memory isn't good enough to tell you exactly. But I think there were seven troopers that I've been able to trace their records, and their services at Fort Harney, who were with Custer, they were all cavalry people of course. None of them were with the 7th --- Custer's regiment. But

they were stationed with the cavalry at Fort Harney at one time or another, or Camp Harney, I'm sorry. I do that sometimes too. And one, I think of course, Corporal Hopkins and Sara Winnemucca for a time made their home. Corporal Hopkins in the service, and Sara Winnemucca the famous Indian gal made their home for awhile there at Camp Harney. And one that I hope, because this is where my research has gone in the last few years, and I hope within the next couple of years to have printed material in the form of a book on this individual. His name was Captain David Perry, and I don't know whether you have ever heard of him, but he was in fact what legends made of Custer. He was the ultimate Indian man. Whenever there was a problem and you can pick up a book on most any Indian War in this particular area, whether it would be the Battle of the Infernal Cabins, whether it be the Nez Perce Conflict, or the Bannock War, he was the man who captured Captain Jack in the Lava Beds. And he was quite an individual. He was the second post commander at Camp Harney. And there's nothing that I can find written about him other than the mention of his name here and there. And I think that, I think that he is going to be an interesting individual to work with, and I hope that maybe sometime again we will be able to talk about him. And thank you very much for your attentiveness. If there are anything, things that you would like to discuss, or any questions that you might have why I'd be more than happy to.

QUESTION: Was there ever a cemetery there at Camp Harney?

RALPH: It didn't show up any at that time, that the camp was there.

QUESTION: Well I was asked by a lady yesterday.

RALPH: I have no documented proof that there was or wasn't. I've never seen anything.

MRS. CLEMENS: There was a cemetery there because I have a ... that was buried there, and I have tried to establish this cemetery, but --- through the Historical Society in Portland they just couldn't find any record of it, because it was never really established as

a cemetery at that time. The soldiers were buried there, and I have four relatives buried there. But --- as far as, I just would like to find out exactly where it is. The lady from Portland thought it would be no trouble at all to get the notes on the, if it had a surveyor, go right and survey it out. But there was nothing that showed it in Washington, D. C. where she wrote anyway, that he could find anything on the cemetery. But there are others buried there, and I have four relatives buried there.

And I also wanted to say that there were some civilians that still have relatives living here in the community that was forced up at Harney. My grandfolks were forced up at Harney. They came in '76, that was Howsers. And there was the Whittings, and the Bakers, and the Wetzels, and the Smyth's from Diamond Valley, and there may be others, but those are some of the civilians and they have some relatives still that are living here in the community. And the Ella Luckey was born there, but she was the first civilian white child, but she wasn't the first white child. There was a lady born there that was from an officers. But Ella was the first white child that was a civilian. But if there is anyone that could give anything on this cemetery ...

RALPH: I've got thirteen years of monthly reports from the camp. And I'll assure you I'll go through them and see if we can't find some mention of that cemetery. We were talking about having it surveyed, and that's kind of interesting, because one of the official reports that the army put out very early in the history of the camp --- longitude and latitude puts Camp Harney somewhere about where the highway would have been, and I think that we've got to believe that that was inaccurate.

MRS. CLEMENS: Well they have two graves where the logging road goes there, and there's two graves over to the side of that, and that was supposedly all ... But I don't know where the establishment of the cemetery was ... I don't know. If there is anything that anyone finds out about that cemetery, I sure would appreciate it.

RALPH: I'll talk to you at another time, but it would be interesting to know about when these relatives died. Do you have that --- the dates?

MRS. CLEMENS: Yes, pretty well, yes.

QUESTION: I would like to know how many men were stationed there most the time, and what was the purpose of the fort, if there was nothing going, and what was the purpose of the camp?

RALPH: All right, the purpose of the camp --- I speculate if I can, but --- partially was because of the fact that we had a lot of people, a lot of professional soldiers about this time. The Civil War was just over, and we had a big country out here that was beginning to be settled. And I think that probably the real reason was that we had a vast area, between what was Fort Boise and The Dalles. And since the first organized wagon train, if you want to think of Meeks Lost Wagon Train as being organized, came through here, people had started to travel through this particular area of the country, and there was nothing here for them. And I think that that was, to help with the Indians, the Indian problems that they thought might arise, was probably what it was. There was such a great variance in the number of men there that I couldn't even give you a figure because they were quite often gone. They would be using them either in the Modoc War --- these wars that we talked about. Anytime there were disturbances they pulled the most of the forces. I really couldn't give you an answer to this, to the average strength. I do remember reading in these monthly reports that they had at one time the animal, the average animal strength that they had, which was not what you asked, but for the winter was two mules and a horse. And so that wasn't very great.

QUESTION: It was a winter camp and then it became the other way around?

RALPH: ... I'm sorry, first just a camp that they used while they were here on reconnaissance. And then in '67 it was established as a permanent winter camp.

QUESTION: Permanent winter camp? Does that mean it wasn't here in the summer?

RALPH: No, I'm sorry if that's confusing, but the camps that they set up --- I'm differentiating between a camp that they just used in the summertime, and one that would be permanent enough that they could use it year around.

QUESTION: My mother-in-law, Mrs. Waddell's father, soldiered at Fort Harney.

RALPH: I've seen his name.

QUESTION: ...

RALPH: Thank you very much.

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