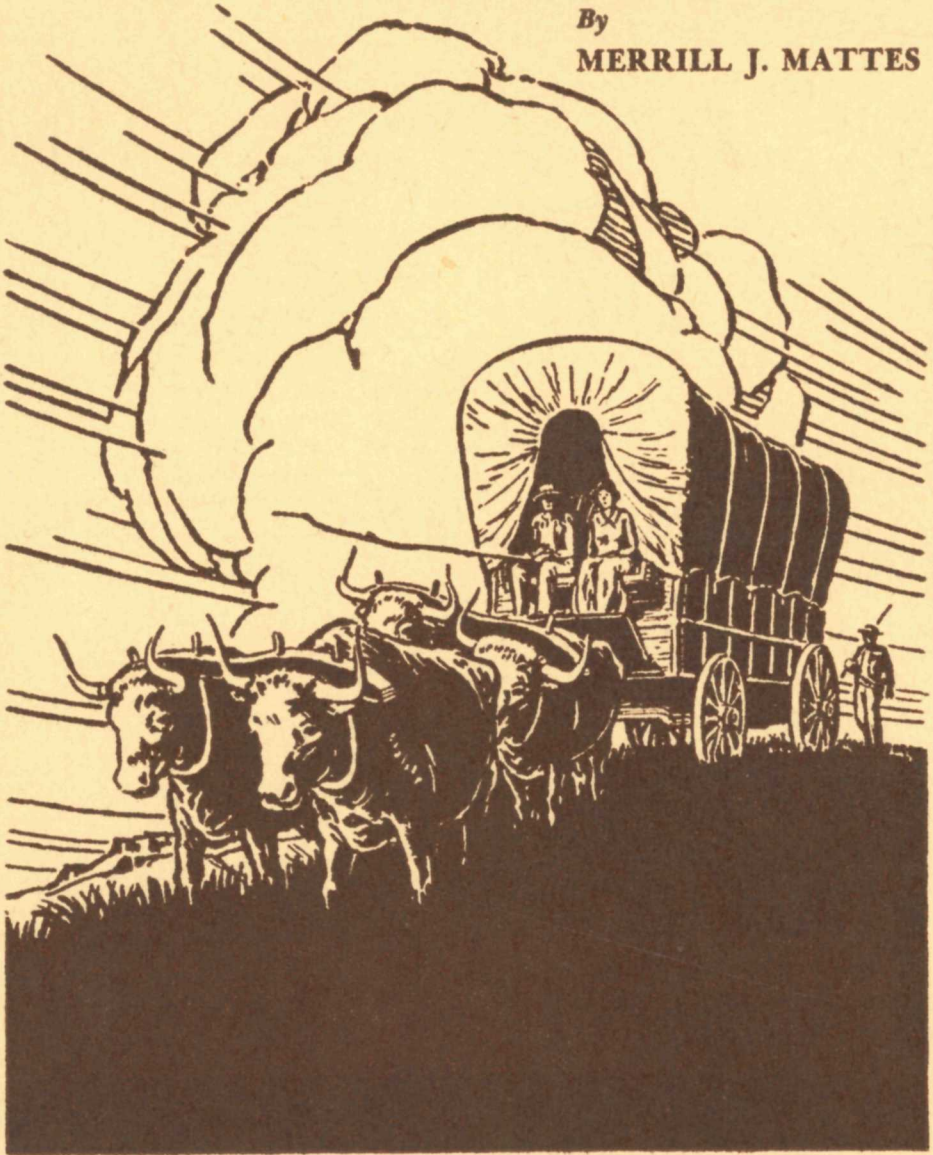


# FORT LARAMIE *and the* FORTY-NINERS

By  
MERRILL J. MATTES



**FORT LARAMIE**  
*and the*  
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Published by  
**ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATURE ASSOCIATION**  
ESTES PARK, COLORADO  
1949

## Foreword

We consider it a privilege to sponsor the publication of this booklet. Appearance of it at this time marks the one hundredth anniversary of the California Gold Rush and the coincidental founding of the famous military post of Fort Laramie. It is intended to memorialize the men—soldiers, traders, emigrants—who were actors in the immortal drama of 1849.

The author, now Historian, Region Two Office, National Park Service, Omaha, Nebraska, has been associated for several years with the Fort Laramie National Monument research project, gathering authentic data relating to structures, trails, military organization, social life and other aspects of the fort's history.

The present study is a detailed, documented, chronological account of one momentous year in the annals of Fort Laramie; it is a self-contained chapter in a projected official history of the post. It is designed with a minimum of editorial comment, to permit the contemporary actors to tell their own epic story.

A substantial number of the original documents herewith presented, taken principally from Government records and private manuscript journals, have not been published before.

ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATURE ASSOCIATION,  
Estes Park, Colorado

# Fort Laramie and the Forty-Niners

## I.

One of the most historic spots in the Trans-Mississippi West lies on the tongue of land formed by the junction of the Laramie and North Platte Rivers, in eastern Wyoming. Here, at Fort Laramie National Monument, administered by the National Park Service, lie the impressive remains of a military post which, for over forty years, represented the might of the United States Government on the Great Plains frontier. Born dramatically in 1849, the year of the epic gold rush to California, within the shaky walls of an old adobe trading post, the event witnessed by a motley horde of emigrants, Indians, and squaw men, Fort Laramie's star ascended amid exciting and violent scenes of the migrations, the Mormon Rebellion, and the Sioux-Cheyenne Wars, declined with the advent of the Union Pacific Railroad, the Black Hills stage line, and the open-range cattle industry, and died tranquilly when the first wave of homesteaders reached Wyoming.

Laramie's Fork was historic ground long before soldiers were stationed there. Before Fort Laramie were the trading posts of Fort John, Fort Platte, and Fort William. Before these, even, were many camps and trading sessions and savage councils. The very name of "Laramie" harks back to a tradition, of uncertain date, that an early Canadian trapper, one Jacques La Raimee, was killed by Indians and his body thrown in this stream. The natural attractions of Laramie's Fork were noted as early as 1812 by Robert Stuart and his companions, travellers en route from Fort Astoria to the States, the first white men to follow the Platte Route.

Tuesday 22nd—Soon after leaving Camp the Country opened greatly to [the] Eastward, and a well wooded stream apparently of considerable magnitude came in from the South West, but whether it is the Arapohays river, we cannot tell—

Abundance of Buffaloe and Antelopes [were seen] in this days march of 26 Miles East South East—<sup>1</sup>

They were noted also by Warren A. Ferris, fur-trapper of the American Fur Company, in 1830:

We crossed the Platte in bull-hides canoes, on the second of June, and encamped a short distance above the mouth of Laramie's Fork, at the foot of the Black Hills. . . . The rich bottoms bordering this stream are decked with dense groves of slender aspen, and occasional tall and stately cotton woods.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Philip A. Rollins, ed., *The Discovery of the Oregon Trail, Robert Stuart's Narrative*, New York, 1935, pp. 195-196, 204.

<sup>2</sup> Paul C. Phillips, ed., *Life in the Rocky Mountains: A Diary . . . by W. A. Ferris*, Denver, 1940, pp. 34-35.



Courtesy Wyoming Historical Department.

The ruined structures of old Fort Laramie breathe the spirit of the Forty-Niners and of the old West. Photographed by C. E. Humberger, 1938.

The setting likewise engaged the attention of Captain Bonneville, heading a trapping expedition to the mountains, in 1832:

On the 26th of May, the travellers encamped at Laramie's Fork, a clear and beautiful stream, rising in the west-south-west, maintaining an average width of twenty yards, and winding through broad meadows abounding in currants and gooseberries, and adorned with groves and clumps of trees.<sup>3</sup>

Laramie Fork itself drained a rich trapping territory in the early days, and many licenses were issued "to trade at Laremais' Point," near the foot of Laramie Peak, which region was then called "the Black Hills."<sup>4</sup> Zenas Leonard's journal of 1832 paints a graphic picture of a trapper's conclave here, preliminary to a general movement toward the Pierre's Hole rendezvous in the mountains,<sup>5</sup> while Charles Larpenteur, in 1833, records another encampment:

On approaching La Ramie's River we discovered three large buffaloes lying dead close together . . . the animals had been killed by lightning during a storm we had the previous day . . . we were ordered to dismount and go to work making a boat out of the hides of the buffalo . . . and the party with all the goods were crossed over by sunset. . . . On the arrival of the trappers and hunters a big drunken spree took place. . . .<sup>6</sup>

The strategic and commercial advantages of the location on Laramie's Fork, at the intersection of the Great Platte Route to the mountains and the Trappers Trail south to Taos, were at once apparent to William Sublette and Robert Campbell in 1834, when they paused here en route to trappers' rendezvous at Ham's Fork of the Green, to launch the construction of log-stockaded Fort William. The event is simply recorded by William Anderson:

[May] 31st.—This evening we arrived at the mouth of Laramie's Fork, where Capt. (William L.) Sublette intends to erect a trader's fort.

June 1st., 1834—This day laid the foundation log of a fort, on Laramie's Fork. A friendly dispute arose . . . as to the name . . . William Patton offered a compromise which was accepted, and the foam flew, in honor of Fort William, which contained the triad prenames of clerk, leader and friend. Leaving Patton and fourteen men to finish the job we started upwards . . .<sup>7</sup>

In 1835 the enterprising partners sold their interest in Fort William to James Bridger, Thomas Fitzpatrick, and others, who in turn released it to the Western Department of the monopolistic American Fur Company (which, after 1838, assumed the official title of Pierre Chouteau, Jr. and Company).

In July 1835 Samuel Parker, one of the first missionaries up

<sup>3</sup> Washington Irving, *Adventures of Captain Bonneville*, New York, n.d., pp. 68-69.

<sup>4</sup> "Abstract of licences issued to trade with the Indians, etc.," in *House Documents, Congress 33, Session 2, No. 97*, cited by LeRoy R. Hafen and Francis M. Young, *Fort Laramie, and the Pageant of the West*, Glendale, 1938, pp. 26-27.

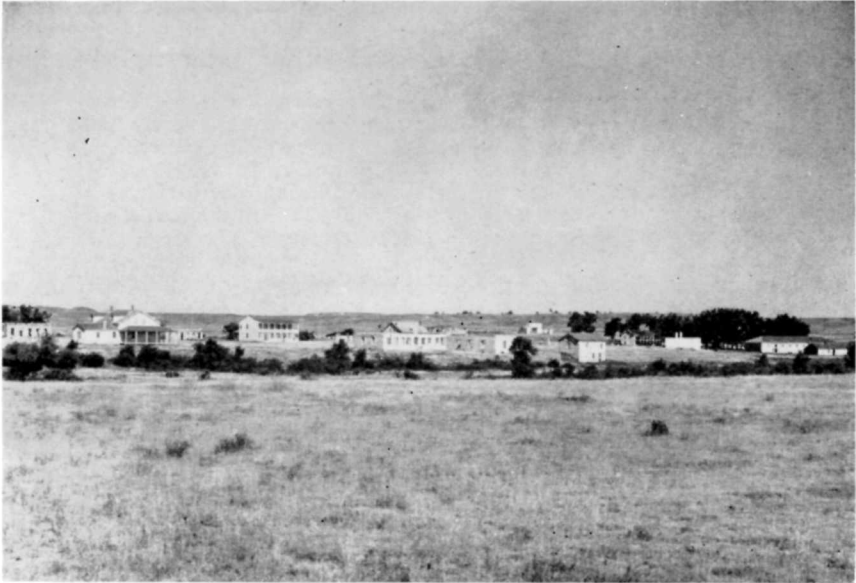
<sup>5</sup> W. F. Wagner, ed., *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, 1831-1836*, Cleveland, 1904, pp. 30-40.

<sup>6</sup> M. M. Quaife, ed., *Forty Years a Fur Trader*, Chicago, 1933, pp. 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Albert J. Partoll, ed., "Anderson's Narrative of a Ride to the Rocky Mountains in 1834," *Frontier and Midland*, Vol. 19, No. 1.

the Trail, arrived in the company of fur traders at "the fort of the Black Hills." He writes:

At this place the caravan halted, and according to immemorial usage, the men are allowed a 'day of indulgence,' as it is called, in which they drink ardent spirits as much as they please, and conduct as they choose. Not unfrequently, the day terminates with a catastrophe of some kind. . . . Today one of the company shot another . . . the ball entered the back, and came out at the side. The wounded man exclaimed, 'I am a dead man,' but after a pause said, 'No, I am not hurt.' The other immediately seized a rifle to finish the work, but was prevented by bystanders. . . .



Courtesy Littler Studios, Torrington, Wyoming.

Fort Laramie in 1949. This modern view shows the impressive character of the military structures despite decades of neglect. The old fort is now a national monument, and the Federal Government recognizes the need for the stabilization of these historic remains.

At this time a horde of Ogalala Sioux came into the Fort to trade. Parker and his aide, Marcus Whitman, met in council with the chiefs, and then were treated to a buffalo dance. Continues Parker, "I cannot say I was much amused to see how well they could imitate brute beasts, while ignorant of God and salvation . . . what will become of their immortal spirits?"<sup>8</sup>

In 1836 the wives of Marcus Whitman and Rev. H. H. Spalding, first white women to follow the Oregon Trail, accepted the meagre hospitality of the Fort. Particularly noteworthy were the chairs,

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, Boston, 1844, pp. 68-70.

with buffalo skin bottoms, a welcome contrast to relentless saddles and wagon-boxes.<sup>9</sup>

The only known pictures of Fort William were made in 1837 by A. J. Miller, an artist in the entourage of Sir William Drummond Stewart. Here, in Miller's own notes, is the traditional log post,

of a quadrangular form, with block houses at diagonal corners . . . over the front entrance is a large block house in which is placed a cannon . . . The Indians encamp in great numbers here 3 or 4 times a year, bringing peltries to be exchanged for dry goods, tobacco, beads and alcohol.

The Indians have a mortal horror of the 'big gun' which rests in the block house, as they have had experience of its prowess and witnessed the havoc produced by its loud 'talk.' They conceive it to be only asleep and have a wholesome dread of its being waked up . . .<sup>10</sup>

In 1840 the illustrious Father De Smet paused at this "Fort la Ramee," where he found some forty lodges of the Cheyennes, "polite, cleanly and decent in their manners. . . . The head chiefs of this village invited me to a feast, and put me through all the ceremonies of the calumet."<sup>11</sup>

In the fall of that year, or the spring of the following, a rival establishment appeared, on the nearby banks of the North Platte. This was adobe-walled Fort Platte, built by Lancaster P. Lupton, veteran of the South Platte trade, and taken over in 1842 by Sybille, Adams and Company. This development, coupled with the rotting condition of Fort William, prompted the Chouteau interests to build a new adobe fort of their own, again on the banks of the Laramie, officially christened Fort John, but popularly dubbed "Fort Laramie." The decade of the 1840's was characterized by bitter rivalry among the trading companies, the coming of the first emigrants to Oregon and Utah, and the appearance of many notable travellers.

The open traffic in firewater characterized the degenerate condition of the fur trade at this time. Reports Rufus B. Sage, in November 1841:

The night of our arrival at Fort Platte was the signal for a grand jollification to all hands . . . who soon got most gloriously drunk . . . Yelling, screeching, fring, shouting, fighting, swearing, drinking and such like interesting performances, were kept up without intermission . . . The scene was prolonged till near sundown the next, and several made their egress from this beastly carousal, minus shirts and coats—with swollen eyes, bloody noses, and empty pockets . . . liquor, in this country, is sold for four dollars per pint.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Myron Eells, *Marcus Whitman, Pathfinder and Patriot*, p. 71, cited by Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Three sketches of Fort William are included in the Miller collection; two of them reproduced in Hafen and Young, *op. cit.* The Miller notes are reproduced in part in Bernard De Voto, *Across the Wide Missouri*, Boston, 1947, p. 446.

<sup>11</sup> Hiram M. Chittenden and Alfred T. Richardson, eds., *Life Letters and Travels of Father Pierre-Jean De Smet, S. J., 1801-1873*, Cleveland, 1905, p. 211.

<sup>12</sup> Rufus B. Sage, *Rocky Mountain Life*, Boston, 1857, p. 100.



Coincident with the construction of the rival forts, in 1841, came the Bidwell expedition, usually conceded to be the first bona fide covered wagon emigrants. In July 1842 Fort John was visited by Lt. John C. Fremont, on his first exploring expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Of this post he writes:

. . . This was a large post, having more the air of military construction than the fort at the mouth of the river. It is on the left bank, on a rising ground some twenty-five feet above the water; and its lofty walls, whitewashed and picketed, with the large bastions at the angles, gave it quite an imposing appearance in the uncertain light of evening . . .

\* \* \*

. . . I walked up to visit our friends at the fort, which is a quadrangular structure, built of clay, after the fashion of the Mexicans, who are generally employed in building them. The walls are about fifteen feet high, surmounted with a wooden palisade, and form a portion of ranges of houses, which entirely surround a yard of about one hundred and thirty feet square. There are two entrances. Over the great entrance is a square tower with loopholes . . . built of earth.<sup>13</sup>

The "cow column," the first great migration to Oregon, consisting of near 1,000 souls, passed by in 1843. Thereafter, the white-topped emigrant wagons became a familiar sight in May and June of each year. Many travellers have left their impressions of the clear swift-flowing Laramie, the neat white-walled fort, the frequent Indian tepee villages nearby. In 1843, writes Johnston: "The occupants of the fort, who have been long there, being mostly French and having married wives of the Sioux, do not now apprehend any danger."<sup>14</sup> In 1844, John Minto records: "We had a beautiful camp on the bank of the Laramie, and both weather and scene were delightful. The moon, I think, must have been near the full . . . at all events we leveled off a space and one man played the fiddle and we danced into the night."<sup>15</sup>

The year 1845 was a banner one for Oregon-bound emigrants, who numbered upwards of 3,000. The classic account of that year is Joel Palmer's journal, which vividly describes the two rival posts at the Junction of the Platte and the Laramie, and a great feast given by the emigrants on behalf of the multitude of Sioux Indians there assembled.<sup>16</sup> Brotherly love also prevailed later that same year when five heavily armed companies of the First Dragoons, led by Col. Stephen W. Kearny, arrived and encamped in the vicinity. At a formal council the savages were diplomatically reminded of the might and beneficence of the Great White Father.<sup>17</sup>

Francis Parkman in his famous book, **The Oregon Trail**, has left an indelible impression of the situation at Fort Laramie in 1846, whence he travelled in the role of historian and ethnologist,

<sup>13</sup> J. C. Fremont, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Washington, 1845, pp. 35, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Overton Johnson and William Winter, Route Across the Rocky Mountains, Princeton, 1932, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> John Minto, "Reminiscences of the Oregon Trail," Oregon Historical Quarterly, Vol. II, No. 2 (June 1901), p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Palmer, Journal of Travels Over the Rocky Mountains, Cincinnati, 1847, pp. 25-28.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen W. Kearny, "Report of a Summer Campaign," Senate Executive Documents, Congress 29, Session 1, No. 1.

sojourning that summer in the region in company with Oglala Sioux. Less well known than the book is the recently published journal, in which he notes the passing of Fort Platte, and the appearance of the ill-starred Donner party:

. . . rode towards the fort. Laramie Mt., Sybil & Adams's deserted fort, and finally Laramie appeared, as the prospect opened among the hills. Rode past the fort, reconnoitred from the walls, and passing the highest ford of Laramie Fork, were received at the gate by Boudeau, the bourgeois. Leading our horses into the area, we found Inds.—men, women and children—standing around, voyageurs and trappers—the surrounding apartments occupied by squaws and children of the traders . . . They gave us a large apartment, where we spread our blankets on the floor. From a sort of balcony we saw our horses and carts brought in, and witnessed a picturesque frontier scene . . .

The emigrants' party passed the upper ford, and a troop of women came into the fort, invading our room without scruple or reserve. Yankee curiosity and questioning is nothing to those of these people . . . Most of them are from Missouri.<sup>18</sup>

In 1847 the Mormon Pioneers made their appearance here en route to the Promised Land. They investigated the place thoroughly, making detailed measurements of Fort Laramie and the abandoned Fort Platte, the latter being near their crossing of the Platte River.<sup>19</sup> The Mormons developed the trail on the north side of the Platte, commencing at Council Bluffs, and as the "Mormon Trail" it has always been distinguished from the main Oregon-California Trail, south of the Platte. At Fort Laramie the two at first joined, although in later years the Mormon Trail continued westward without crossing at the Fort.

In 1847 there was a sizeable migration to Oregon and California as well as Utah, but in 1848 the "Saints" had the field pretty much to themselves. It was also in 1848, as every school boy knows, that James Marshall discovered gold at the millrace near Sutter's Fort on the Sacramento River, California Territory, thus touching off the epic California gold rush. As the year 1849 dawned, the craze was beginning to sweep the country. There were not a fraction enough ships to provide passage for all those who wanted to get to the mines, by way of Cape Horn. Thousands converged on the Missouri border towns. Wagons, oxen, mules, gear of all kinds, commanded premium prices. It was clear that something was about to happen to "the Great American Desert" and the adobe-walled trading post on the Laramie.

## II.

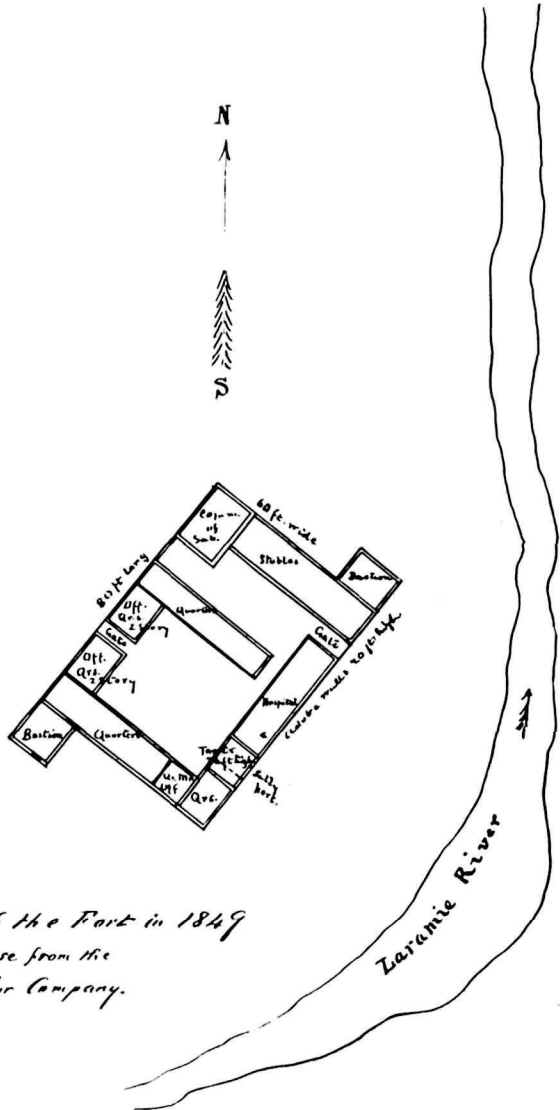
Even before the gold fever, with increasing numbers of its citizens migrating westward across the hostile plains, it was perhaps inevitable that the Federal Government would set up a chain of military posts along the Great Platte route, and the idea had

<sup>18</sup> Mason Wade, ed., *The Journals of Francis Parkman*, New York, 1947, pp. 439-442.

<sup>19</sup> William Clayton's *Journal*, Salt Lake City, 1921, pp. 206-214.

# Locality and History of Post.

*history of the Post.*



*Ground Plan of the Fort in 1849  
immediately after its purchase from the  
American Fur Company.*

War Department Records, National Archives.

Ground plan of Fort Laramie (Fort John) in 1849, immediately after its purchase by the Army from the American Fur Company. This plan was made by Assistant Surgeon Schell, in 1870, from data supplied by Ordnance Sergeant Leodgar Schnyder and citizen John Richard, both allegedly present in 1849.

been broached at various times by such respected authorities as Fremont, Parkman, and Fitzpatrick. It was officially set in motion by President Polk in a message to Congress in 1845, which resulted in the enactment, on May 19, 1846, of "an act to provide for raising a regiment of Mounted Riflemen, and for establishing military stations on the route to Oregon."<sup>20</sup> The Mexican War delayed action until 1848 when Fort Kearny, the first military post on the Trail, was established on the Lower Platte. Then destiny pointed its finger at "Fort John on the Laramie." This doomed structure was to provide the picturesque back-drop for a colorful pageant soon to be enacted. From yellowing documents the epic of 1849 unfolds:

March 23, Washington. Adj. Gen. R. Jones to Bvt. Maj. Gen. D. E. Twiggs, at St. Louis:

To carry out the provisions of . . . the Act of May 19, 1846, relative to establishing the military posts on the Oregon route, and to afford protection to emigrants to that country and California, known to be numerous, it now becomes necessary to establish the second station, as directed by the Secretary of War, June 1, 1847, at or near Fort Laramie, a trading station belonging to the American Fur Company.

You are desired to authorize [Lieut. Woodbury of the Corps of Engineers] to purchase the buildings of Fort Laramie, the second station, should he deem it necessary to do so.<sup>21</sup>

(Young Daniel P. Woodbury, first of the major characters in our story, native of New Hampshire, graduate of West Point, now First Lieutenant, Corps of Engineers, was destined to become Brevet Major General in the Union Army, for gallant and meritorious services at Bull Run and Fredericksburg. He died in 1864 at Key West, Florida, age 51.)<sup>22</sup>

April 9: Orders by General Twiggs:

There will be a post established at or near Fort Laramie. Its garrison will consist of companies A and E, Mounted Riflemen, and Company G, 6th Infantry, under the command of Maj. W. F. Sanderson, Mounted Riflemen . . . Major Sanderson will leave Fort Leavenworth by the 10th of May, with Company E . . . and will proceed to locate a post in the vicinity of Fort Laramie . . . The remainder of the garrison for this post will follow on the 1st of June, with the years supplies . . . ordered for their post.<sup>23</sup>

(Maj. Winslow F. Sanderson, Captain of the Mounted Riflemen since May 27, 1846, was breveted subsequently for "gallant and meritorious service in the battles of Contreras and Churubusco" in the Mexican War. He was to serve at Fort Laramie until October 1850. He died in 1853.)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> J. D. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. IV, p. 396.

<sup>21</sup> Files of the Adjutant General's Office, cited by Hafen and Young, op. cit., p. 140.

<sup>22</sup> Cullum, *Biographical Register*, Vol. I, pp. 496-497, cited by Georgia W. Read and Ruth Gaines, eds., *Gold Rush: The Journals, Drawings etc. of J. Goldsborough Bruff*, New York, 1944, p. 488.

<sup>23</sup> Files of the Adjutant General's Office, cited by Hafen and Young, op. cit., pp. 140-141.

<sup>24</sup> F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army*, p. 859.

April 19, St. Louis, Asst. Adj. Gen. D. C. Buell to Major Sanderson:

A copy of the original instructions of the Secretary of War . . . is herewith respectfully enclosed . . . A thorough reconnaissance should be made of the country in the vicinity of Fort Laramie, before deciding upon a locality.

It is believed that Fort Laramie is not the most suitable position for the post, and the momentary advantage of finding there, at once, temporary shelter, of course will not of itself decide you in favor of that point. Nevertheless, authority will be given to the Engineer Officer to purchase it, if necessary.<sup>25</sup>

April 20, at St. Louis, Buell to Woodbuy:

. . . should the position of the Indian Station of Fort Laramie be found the most eligible for the military post to be established in that vicinity, you are authorized to purchase the station of its owners; provided it can be done at a reasonable price, say not to exceed two thousand dollars.<sup>26</sup>

April 23, at St. Louis, Brig. Gen. D. E. Twiggs to Gen. R. Jones:

. . . The expense of supplying the posts at Fort Laramie and Salt Lake will be very great . . . Should it be impracticable to supply those posts from the cultivation of the lands about them, I am convinced that the withdrawal to the frontier of the Mounted portion of the garrisons during the winter, will be found the best plan that can be adopted; the posts being held during that time by the Infantry . . .<sup>27</sup>

### III.

While the Mounted Riflemen were still making furious preparations for their strenuous assignment, the first wave of emigrants was rolling westward from the border settlements. A correspondent for the **Missouri Republican** wrote from Fort Kearny, on May 18:

. . . the inundation of gold diggers is upon us. The first specimen, with a large pick-axe over his shoulder, a long rifle in his hand, and two revolvers and a bowie knife stuck in his belt, made his appearance here a week ago last Sunday . . . Up to this morning four hundred and seventy-six wagons have gone past this point; and this is but the advance guard.

Every state, and I presume almost every town and county in the United States, is now represented in this part of the world. Wagons of all patterns, sizes and descriptions, drawn by bulls, cows, oxen, jack asses, mules and horses, are daily seen rolling along towards the Pacific, guarded by walking arsenals . . .<sup>28</sup>

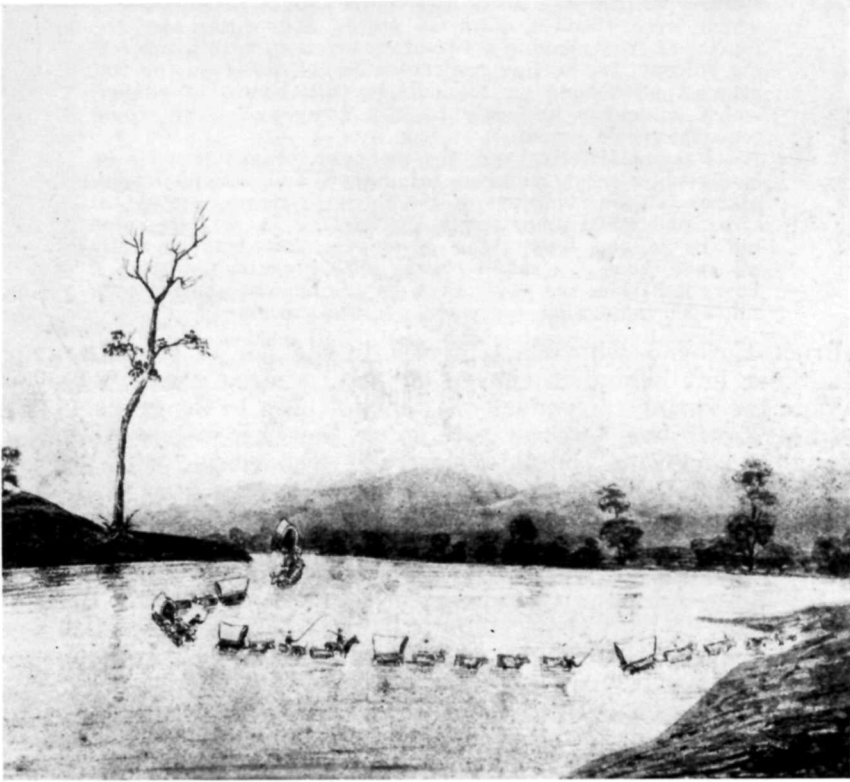
Endless columns of white-topped wagons crawled like gigantic ants along both sides of the river Platte, jockeying for position, milling and piling up at the dangerous fords. The advance guard of a multitude variously estimated at 30,000 to 50,000 souls was

<sup>25</sup> War Department Archives, Fort Myer, Virginia (microfilm document No. 1).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid* (document No. 4).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* (document No. 5).

<sup>28</sup> *Missouri Republican*, July 6, 1849, cited by Hafen and Young, *op cit.*, p. 146.



Courtesy Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Contemporary sketch of a scene familiar to the Forty-Niners, showing an emigrant train fording the Laramie River. This is the work of an artist who accompanied the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen under Colonel Loring.

spearheading the advance upon Fort Laramie. After crossing the South Platte, the emigrants came successively upon the famous landmarks along the south bank of the North Platte—Ash Hollow, Courthouse Rock, Chimney Rock, Scotts Bluffs. At the latter point, some fifty miles east of Fort Laramie, was stationed a trader and blacksmith named Robidoux, the only white settler in sight between Fort Kearny and Fort Laramie. Otherwise, the valley of the North Platte was given over to buffalo herds, skulking Sioux, wolves, prairie dogs, and mirages.

According to eastbound Mormon observers, the first Argonauts had reached Laramie Fork by May 22.<sup>29</sup> The first identifiable traveller to reach the trading post, about May 28, was an Irish citizen, Kelly by name, who was not impressed:

. . . my glowing fancy vanished before the wretched reality—  
a miserable, cracked, dilapidated, adobe, quadrangular en-

<sup>29</sup> Mormon Church Archives, cited by Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

closure, with a wall about twelve feet high, three sides of which were shedded down as stores and workshops, the fourth, or front, having a two-story erection, with a projecting balcony, for hurling projectiles or hot water on the foe, propped all around on the outside with beams of timber, which an enemy had only to kick away and down would come the whole structure.

I found Mr. Husband, the manager, or governor as he is styled, a most obliging, intelligent, and communicative person . . . we made use of the forge to tighten our wheel tyres, and make other small repairs . . . There were some Indians of the Sioux tribe about the fort trading while we were there . . . rattling away with great volubility . . . There is besides the governor, a superintendent and ten men employed in stowing and packing robes and skins.<sup>30</sup>

(Bruce Husband, who was to figure in the sale of Fort Laramie, had been left behind in charge by Maj. Andrew Drips, who had left in the spring to conduct his buffalo robes to St. Louis. Little is known of him, but we may infer that he was a full-blown "mountain man" of the old time trade, who viewed with distaste the manner in which events were rushing toward him. In a postscript to his letter of May 24 at "Fort John" to Andrew Drips, he prophesies: "I don't think I shall go back to St. Louis or even to the states again.")<sup>31</sup>

William Johnston's company, on May 29, found the Laramie low enough to ford comfortably, then camped at the forks, and walked up to the stockade, which he describes with more fervor than Kelly:

. . . Besides a private entrance, there was a large one with a gate which faced toward the angles of the rivers. Over the entrance was a tower with loopholes, and at two of the angles, diagonally opposite each other, were bastions, also perforated with loopholes, through which all sides of the fort could be defended. Two brass swivels were mounted at the entrance . . . Fort Laramie is the principal trading post of the American Fur Company . . . It is soon, however, to pass into possession of the United States . . .

It seems to be a custom of emigrants on arriving here to lighten up, and Fort Laramie is made a dumping place for all that can be spared . . .

We observed quite a number of Indian women, the wives of traders and trappers, and their children, lounging the fort or sitting in the doorways . . . We could not escape the conviction that soap and water were scarce . . . or . . . greatly neglected.<sup>32</sup>

By June 12 the banks of the Laramie were running full and causing trouble. In George P. Burrall's diary we find:

. . . A good many teams crossing here. Had to raise our wagon boxes to keep the water from running in. Stopped at the fort one hour. No troops there. One trader and a blacksmith shop. Good many wagons repairing here and some thrown away.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> William Kelly, *An Excursion to California*, London, 1851, pp. 154-155.

<sup>31</sup> Drips Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, cited by Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>32</sup> William G. Johnston, *Experiences of a Forty-Niner*, Pittsburgh, 1892, pp. 120-124.

<sup>33</sup> George P. Burrall, *Typescript Diary*, in Newberry Library, Chicago.

Alonzo Delano, who also appeared on the scene on June 12, was a more useful observer:

. . . A drive of seven miles from our encampment brought us to Laramie River, where we found a multitude of teams, waiting their turn to cross a swift and not safe current. It became necessary to raise our wagon boxes about six inches, in order to prevent the water flowing in and wetting our provisions . . . Fort Laramie is simply a trading post, standing about a mile above the ford . . . Its neat white-washed walls presented a welcome sight to us . . . and the motley crowd of emigrants, with their array of wagons, cattle, horses and mules, gave a pleasant appearance of life and animation . . .

Around the fort were many wagons, which had been sold or abandoned . . . Here was a deposit for letters to be sent to the States . . . on which the writers paid twenty-five cents . . .<sup>34</sup>

On the following day, June 13, Joseph Hackney found the river still up and very swift:

. . . went 4 miles to Larime river we had to raise our wagon beds up and put block under them to raise them above the water . . . [some] teams got into deep water and wet all of their load . . . fort Larime is one mile from the river it is built after the fashion of the Mexican's ranch there is no troops hear yet but they expect them in a few days . . .<sup>35</sup>

Two valuable informants appear on June 14 to reflect the crescendo-like rush of the migration. Both mention the difficult ford and the deserted Fort Platte. Joseph Wood writes:

. . . found the water in Laramie's Fk so deep as to cover the fore wheels of our Wagon . . . On our right from here; was the bare mud walls of an old deserted fort and on our left & one mile up Laramie's fork was the Fort of that name. It present quite an imposing appearance as you approach it & was surrounded with emigrants, who were gratifying their long pent up curiosity . . . The fort was nearly deserted by those who properly belong to it . . . they being gone to the States with hides and furs. Emigrants were throwing away freight which they had retained with the hope of selling here to advantage . . . I went to view a spot where an Indian corpse had been pulled down from a tree.<sup>36</sup>

Vincent Geiger found Mr. Husband still head man at the Fort:

. . . Several Indian squaws with half breed children were found there, and a number of Mexicans. There is nothing enticing or pleasing about the place. They were destitute of all articles of trade except jerked buffalo meat. We found a young emigrant who had been accidentally shot in the thigh . . . There were no Indians about, they having gone to war with the Crows.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Alonzo Delano, *Across the Plains*, New York, 1936, p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Page, *Wagons West*, New York, 1930, pp. 143-144.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph W. Wood, *Manuscript Diary*, photostat copy in Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois, from original in Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

<sup>37</sup> David M. Potter, ed., *Trail to California*, New Haven, 1945, pp. 106-107.



On June 15 Isaac Wistar and a companion, scouting in advance of their train, attempted to elude Indians on the prowl for stray scalps. Writes Wistar:

. . . We hoped to put Laramie's Fork between us and those undesirable acquaintances, but on reaching it, found it swelled to a turbulent river . . . cold as ice and with a rushing current full of slippery, round boulders . . .

. . . We both stripped for swimming, and securely fastened clothes and arms to the saddles, tying the ammunition on our heads . . . I jumped my horse off the vertical bank, found swimming water almost immediately, and quartering down stream, made the opposite bank some 100 yards below . . .

Walking up to the adobe Fort, "a rough and primitive-looking place," Wistar found countless dilapidated wagons standing about, some broken up for material for pack saddles. Its inhabitants consisted of a "clerk" and six or eight others, all French or half-breeds. He continues:

. . . we lounged round the fort, looking at the trading and store rooms, fur presses and other arrangements novel to us . . . when, being assured . . . that Indians would not molest us in the sight of the fort, . . . we moved across the level plain to the Platte . . . and had an opportune success in killing a young antelope.

Wistar is the last recorded eyewitness of the adobe Fort in its role as a sleepy trading post, for the next day, June 16, Major Sanderson and his company of Mounted Riflemen arrived on the scene. The journal continues:

A man and several head of stock were drowned last night from a large emigrant train, while crossing Laramie's Fork. Tonight our own train came rolling with men and teams well battered by . . . forced marches . . . The Fork having gone down very much, all hands went right to work blocking up wagon beds, doubling teams, lashing fast cargoes, etc. and, after some hard work, crossed everything without loss. Later a U. S. Government train of one company of dragoons under Major Saunders, with wagons, stock and belongings, arrived and crossed, the stream having still further fallen. Their business is to take charge of the fort for a government post.<sup>38</sup>

E. B. Farnham was another eyewitness of events on this crucial day:

Started at sunrise. Came to Larimie creek, one mile from the fort, that we had to ford . . . Other trains that had gotten there earlier had to take their turn, and there was quite a number. Our hearts were light in anticipation of getting to the fort. Here among this multitude all was excitement to get across. Something was ahead, it seemed like a gala day, as a convention . . . Then the sound of the cannon, that was fired to greet the arrival of Major Sanderson, came booming from the fort . . .

. . . We found [Fort Laramie] to be a place of no very im-

<sup>38</sup> Isaac Jones Wistar, *Autobiography*, 1827-1905, New York, 1937, pp. 83-86.

posing structure and appearance . . . The inhabitants of this fort consist at this time of about 18 or 20 traders and trappers, regular old 'hosses' as they term themselves. Some of these have squaw wives living here at the fort and are a rough, outlandish, whisky drinking, looking set . . . Major Sanderson is to take possession . . .<sup>39</sup>

Company E, now on the scene, included 58 enlisted men, 5 officers. Besides Sanderson and Woodbury, these were Maj. S. P. Moore, Surgeon (later Surgeon General of the Confederate Army); Capt. Thomas Duncan (to become a Brigadier General during the Civil War); and Capt. George McLane (brevetted for gallantry in the Mexican War, killed in battle against Indians in 1860), as Adjutant and Quartermaster.<sup>40</sup>

The emigrants who have testified thus far all followed the south bank of the Platte. A respectable number, however, "jumped off" from Council Bluffs, and thence followed the north bank of the Platte as far as Fort Laramie, where they finally crossed. The Platte was, of course, a much more formidable stream than the Laramie and, during flood stage, could not be crossed except by a precarious ferryboat, apparently rigged up and operated by the traders. Isaac Foster was among those who pulled up, on the 15th, on the left bank:

. . . one man was drowned, they advised us not to attempt to swim the river, which is 200 yards in width; saw an Indian; young one, in the top of a tree, buried, being wrapped in a blanket and skin.

Saturday, 16th—Crossed the Platte over to Fort Laramie . . . we paid \$1.00 per wagon for the use of the boat to ferry us over . . . there seems to be about 50 persons residing [at the fort], and provisions without money and without price; as you pass along you see piles of bacon and hard bread thrown by the side of the road; about 50 wagons left here, and many burned and the irons left; trunks, clothes, boots and shoes, left by the hundred, spades, picks, guns and all other fixings for a California trip . . . here in the junction of the roads hundreds of teams are coming together . . . here came up a company of U. S. dragoons, two companies having passed on before, and a company of infantry behind the troops for the protection of the emigrants; I learned that one company is to be stationed hereabouts; here we enter the Black Hills . . .<sup>41</sup>

Lieutenant Woodbury wasted no time in getting down to brass tacks with the Fur Company management. Although formal arrangements were not concluded for another ten days, and although none of the principals have recorded the event, it seems clear that Woodbury and Husband talked things over right away, and a deal was agreed upon; for, writes eyewitness Wistar, on June 17, "the stars and stripes went up on the fort this morning, receiving our hearty cheers." The alacrity of the Company at the prospect of a

<sup>39</sup> Elijah Bryan Farnham, Manuscript Journal, in family possession.

<sup>40</sup> Nebraska State Historical Collections, Vol. XX (1922), pp. 192-193.

<sup>41</sup> Lucy F. Sexton, ed., *The Foster Family, California Pioneers*, Santa Barbara, 1925, pp. 31-32.



cash offer is testimonial enough to the decrepit state of the fur trade in 1849.

Wistar continues,

. . . Since we can get no more animals and there is no other inhabited place nearer than Fort Hall, many hundred miles distant, it is evident we must carry our wagons through, or do worse; so we conclude to nurse our failing teams and make the best of it . . . and we still farther reduced our [load] to the estimated weight of about 200 pounds per man. This work, with washing, mending, reloading and cooking for some days ahead, occupied all hands today, and tomorrow bright and early, away we go.<sup>42</sup>

Farnham's train also laid over on the 17th:

This day we lay by and while we were here we had the tires to our wagons cut and re-set . . . One of our men took a faint spell while walking around the fort . . . took him into the avenue of the fort where there was a shade and he soon recovered. The weather was sultry hot. I saw a man that was wounded by a comrade . . . even the man that shot him deserted him and . . . stole one of his blankets . . . Another man that was sick and reduced to a mere living frame, was laying in a wagon near the fort. His entire company had deserted him. However, they left him the wagon to lay in and provisions of two barrels of liquor; these they could not take along with them.<sup>43</sup>

Fort Laramie marked the end of the High Plains, the beginning of the long upgrade haul to the Rocky Mountains. It was the end of the line for the sick, the tired, the downhearted. Tempers, frayed by weeks of toil, mud, dust, sun glare, and Indian alarms, snapped. Amos Steck, on June 19, tried to buy ox-shoes and was asked an exorbitant price by the traders, "though there was a blacksmith shop there and a copious abundance of iron. Such imposition we could not stand. Camped one mile beyond. . ."<sup>44</sup> Sterling Clark was among those who, fed up with a clumsy, temperamental wagon, discarded it and the bulk of his earthly possessions at this point, and pinned his faith on a pack mule. Packing problems, coupled with diarrhea, continued to plague him.<sup>45</sup> Another kind of annoyance cropped up to bother Lucius Fairchild of the Madison (Wisconsin) Star Company. This was the advent of a contingent of Mounted Riflemen under Col. William Loring, headed for Oregon. He writes, "The U. S. Train has been near us every since they struck this road and always in the way, in fact they were the most perfect nuisance on the whole road." Fairchild made it to the Fort just ahead of the Riflemen, pausing only long enough to observe: "Fort Laramie is built of mud & stone in the form of a Hollow square." At Green River his luck ran out and he was "taken with the Mountain Fever . . . and lay nearly 2 weeks in the wagon being dragged over a most awful road."<sup>46</sup>

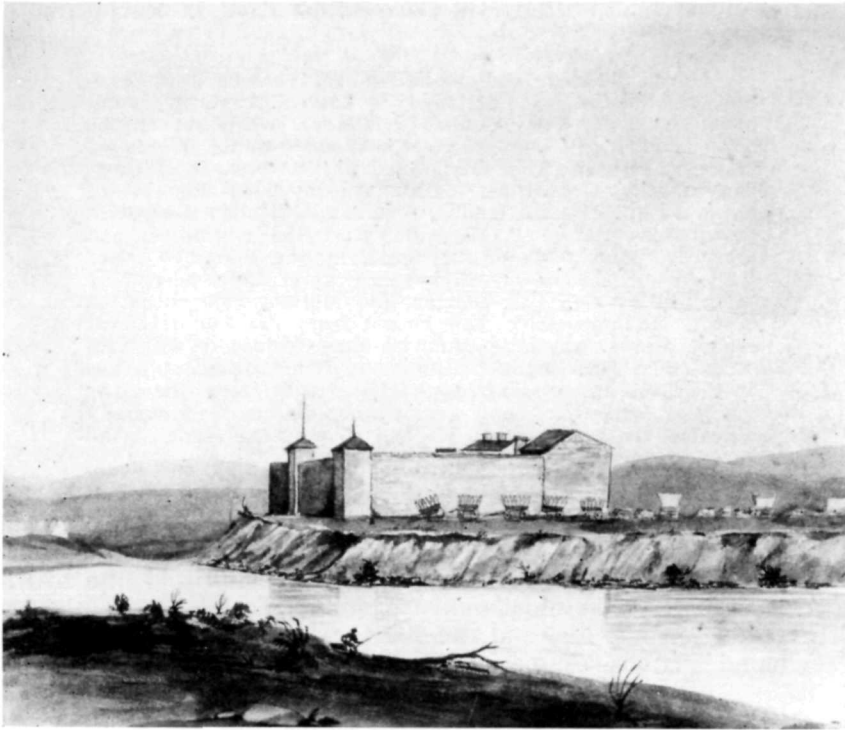
<sup>42</sup> Wistar, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Farnham, *op. cit.*

<sup>44</sup> Amos Steck, *Diary Manuscript*, Colorado Historical Society, cited by Hafen and Young, *op. cit.*, pp., 151-152.

<sup>45</sup> Sterling B. F. Clark, *How Many Miles from St. Joe?*, San Francisco, 1929, pp. 15-16.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph Schafer, Ed., *California Letters of Lucius Fairchild*, Madison, 1931, pp. 31-32.



Courtesy Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Contemporary sketch of Fort Laramie in 1849, made by an unknown artist, possibly William Tappan, who accompanied the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen under Colonel Loring. This was the fur-traders' "Fort John," replaced subsequently by Army structures.

The arrival of the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen at Laramie Creek at 2 p.m. on the 22d of June has been officially and dully recorded by Maj. Osborne Cross, Quartermaster:

. . . It was excessively warm and dusty . . .

There are no trees about the fort to protect it from the rays of the sun, which are reflected from the surrounding hills. It is by no means a handsome location . . . The hunting at this place has generally been very good and is its only attraction. Even this has been greatly diminished since the emigrants have made it the great thoroughfare to Oregon and California . . .

. . . This was to be a resting place for us for a few days . . .

From the first of June our journey was made very unpleasant by constant rains which made the roads very heavy and the hauling extremely hard. Wood is not to be procured from the time you leave Fort Kearny until you arrive at this place. Nothing is to be seen but the naked valley and boundless prairies in whatever direction the eye is turned. There is a little more variety after arriving on the North Platte river . . .<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Raymond Settle, Ed., *March of the Mounted Riflemen*, Glendale, 1940, pp. 97-99.

Much less stiff and stilted, and more informative, is the journal of Pvt. George Gibbs:

Marched sixteen and one-half miles, reaching Fort Laramie. Finding the grass destroyed by the emigrants in its immediate vicinity (we) camped a mile or two above on the left (?) bank of Laramie's river without crossing. We found Major Sanderson's command, consisting at present of Company E only, already arrived and encamped on this side of the creek opposite the trading-fort. Major S(anderson), with (Lieutenant Daniel P.) Woodbury of the engineers, had proceeded some forty or fifty miles up the Platte to select the site of the new fort but we were most hospitably welcomed by Captains Duncan and McLane. The situation of this trading-post is well known from Fremont's report. Hardly anything could be more forlorn or destitute of interest. The regiment, however, found excellent grass on the river in a pleasant spot fringed with trees where the facilities for bathing and washing our clothes were equally welcome. In the afternoon we had an amusing scene at the lower encampment.

Here follows an account of a drumhead court-martial staged by the enlisted men for the benefit of an emigrant found in possession of Army horses. Just as the terror-stricken culprit supposed he was about to be hanged, an officer intervened and told him to run for his life, which he did "amidst a volley of balls fired in every other direction but his, and ran for the hills with the speed of a greyhound." Gibbs resumes, on the 24th,

. . . Orders had been given out to cut and dry a quantity of grass in anticipation of scarcity on the route, but Major Sanderson had returned with information that abundance exists for a distance of seventy-five miles above here . . . The only change in the disposition of the command is that Captain Rhett remains here and Captain (Mc)Lane proceeds with us.

(1st Lieut. Thomas G. Rhett, of South Carolina, would one day become a hero of the Confederacy.) And on the 25th:

. . . The regiment has crossed the creek and is under way. This letter goes by special express sent by Major Sanderson under charge of Captain Perry. A charge of two cents a letter is made to defray expenses.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV.

The following day marks officially the transition from trading post to military post. The purchase transaction is fully recorded in the deed, dated June 28, 1851, at St. Louis, signed by Pierre Choteau, Jr., John B. Sarpy, Joseph A. Sire, and John F. A. Sandford:

. . . on the 26th day of June 1849 it was agreed by and between Bruce Husbands acting as agent and attorney for Pierre Choteau Jr. & Company . . . and D. P. Woodbury,

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp. 324-327.

Lieut. of Corps of Engineers acting for and on behalf of the United States: that Pierre Choteau Jr. & Co. should release and transfer to the United States all the houses, buildings and improvements by them at any time held or occupied as a trading Post at Fort John, commonly called Fort Laramie . . . including all permanent buildings . . . situated within ten miles of the junction . . . of said Laramie Fork with said Platte river, including also, all the rights and claims of said Pierre Choteau Jr. & Co. to trade with Indians and others . . .

. . . said D. P. Woodbury did on the 26th day of June A. D. 1849, for and on behalf of the United States, pay to the said Co. the full amount of said sum of Four thousand dollars.<sup>49</sup>

On the following day Major Sanderson reported to Adjutant General Jones that, since his arrival at the site on June 16, he and Woodbury made a thorough reconnaissance of the country in the neighborhood of this place, going at least 75 miles up the Platte:

This was found to be the most eligible for a military post, and was purchased at my request. . . .

Pine timber suitable for all building purposes is found in abundance within twelve miles, on the north side of the Platte.

The best of limestone is also found about the same distance, on the south side of the same river.

The Laramie is a rapid and beautiful stream, and will furnish an abundance of good water for the command.

There is plenty of grass for making hay within convenient distance of the post.

Good dry wood is found in abundance and easily to be obtained.

The entire command . . . are already employed in cutting and hauling timber, burning lime and coal, cutting and making hay. The saw-mill will soon be in active operation.<sup>50</sup>

It would take a minimum of two weeks by special courier to report this development. A telegraph might have saved General Jones the trouble of writing an order, shortly nullified, to the effect that

. . . the Mounted troops stationed at Fort Kearny and Laramie will be withdrawn from their respective posts in time to go into winter Quarters at Fort Leavenworth. . . . This arrangement is necessary, in consequence of the great expense and difficulty in procuring forage at these posts . . . this will be regarded as a permanent arrangement.<sup>51</sup>

The official transition of the post, of momentous consequence for the years to come, was hardly noticed by the emigrants at flood-tide. The case of John E. Brown is typical. At Fort Laramie, where he arrived June 28, one of his mess mates was turned over to the Army surgeon with one leg full of buckshot, received accidentally, while another, simply fed up, turned around and started for home. The party then cast off their heavy wagon, attached six

<sup>49</sup> War Department Archives, Fort Myer, Virginia (microfilm document No. 7).

<sup>50</sup> War Department Archives, cited by Hafen and Young, op. cit., pp. 141-142.

<sup>51</sup> War Department Archives, Fort Myer, Virginia (microfilm document No. 8).

mules to the small one, and prepared to set forth, when an officer of the post accosted them and appropriated one mule with the "U.S." stamp. The pages of Brown's diary now smoulder with a sense of outrage:

. . . The protection afforded to emigrants by the chain of Military Posts is only another name for robbery. . . . In consequence of this high-handed piece of villainy we struck our tent and drove four miles.

The very next day two delegates, sent to the Fort to expostulate with the commander, returned in triumph with the sorely needed beast, and the deserter also returned, "having taken a second thought about the difficulties in reaching home." The Brown diary now takes a different tack:

Major Sanderson . . . conducts himself with much credit. Especially in this affair. He is a Gentleman in every sense of the word, and will be of infinite service to the emigrants.<sup>52</sup>

Sunday, July 1, was hot, with a dense overcast, reports Joseph Sedgley:

. . . Mosquitoes and gnats about in any quantity. Some of the men are badly poisoned, and we are obliged to wear veils for protection from these troublesome pests. . . . Met soldiers with the mail, bound for the States. At nine, we came to the Laramie River. . . . It took us two hours to ford. Two men . . . were drowned here. There are about seventy-five soldiers here, under Maj. Sanderson. Here we found a great variety of articles which California-bound travelers have been obliged to leave behind . . . we, following their example, again lighted our load of about five hundred pounds . . . and camped at the Black Hills. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Patriotism was soon to have its innings. Writes Oliver Goldsmith:

On the third day of July we were within two miles of Fort Laramie. A large majority of the company were anxious to have a Fourth of July celebration, so we concluded to remain camped and have a grand 'blow out.' All the mess chests were removed from the wagons and converted into tables, and the finest dinner we could get up, by drawing liberally on the commissary department, was prepared. Speeches were made, songs sung, games played and general hilarity prevailed. Two good days were thus lost, which only Captain Potts and myself seemed to realize might be very valuable before our journey's end was reached. . . .

On the fifth of July we arrived at Fort Laramie, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. . . . There were stationed at the fort about fifty men. . . . There were several camps of mountaineers, trappers and Indians just outside the fort. . . .

These people all thought we were rather late in our journey, and advised us to keep moving as rapidly as possible. When we reached this altitude the cholera left us, but we were never without some drawback. From good roads, plenty of feed for our stock and drinkable water we were now to ex-

<sup>52</sup> John E. Brown, *Memoirs of a Forty-Niner*, New Haven, 1907, pp. 13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph Sedgley, *Overland to California in 1849*, Oakland, 1877, pp. 32-33.



perience the trials, discomforts, and, finally, the horrors of journeying through a country lacking all three.<sup>54</sup>

Goldsmith is not the first to mention the Asiatic cholera, which laid so many of the Forty-Niners low; but he explains why it was not an important factor at Fort Laramie or beyond. The increasing elevation seems to have neutralized the deadly germ. There is no record of any deaths from this disease at Fort Laramie itself. Up to this point, however, there was ample evidence of its ravages. David Dewolf writes his wife from this place, on July 7:

I embrace this opportunity to write . . . for I expect it will be the last chance I will have before I reach California. . . . My health has been very good. . . . I have been unwell several times but not so bad but what I kept about but some poor Californians have not fared so well. A great many of their bones are left to bleach on the route. We have passed a great many graves but a person must expect some to die out of the large number going. . . . I have visited graves where the person was buried not more than twenty inches deep and found them dug up by the wolves . . . and their bones scattered to bleach upon the plains. . . .<sup>55</sup>

Joseph Sedgley, above-mentioned, records many burials. However, the best job of immortalizing the inscriptions found on crude headboards, gravestones, and wagon tires was done by J. Goldsborough Bruff, historian and poet laureate of the Washington City and California Mining Association. He did not miss an epitaph. At Ash Hollow he found: "Rachel E. Pattison, Aged 18, d. June 19"; near Courthouse Rock: "Jno Hoover, d. June 18, 1849. Aged 12." At Chimney Rock he found six marked graves of recent date, cholera getting the most credit. "James Roby, Mounted Rifleman, age 20," and three others were at rest in the vicinity of Scotts Bluff. And then, on July 8, just one day short of Fort Laramie, "poor Bishop," one of his own company, died of "this mysterious and fatal visitation." Bishop's remains were interred with greater ceremony than was usual in such cases:

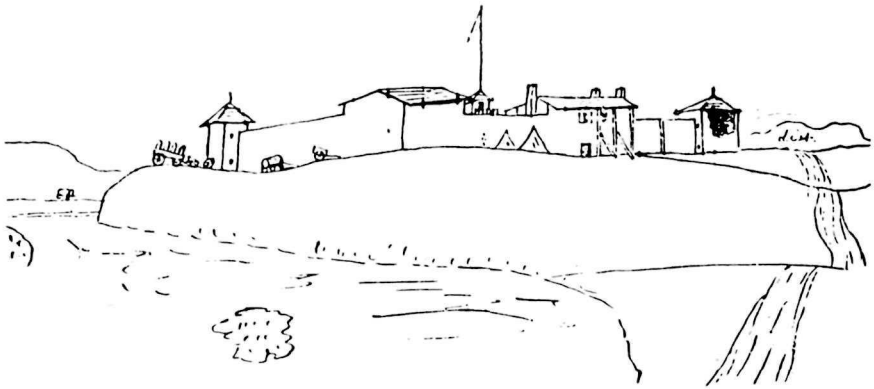
. . . The messmates of the deceased laid him out, sewed him up in his blue blanket, and prepared a bier, formed of his tent-poles. I had a grave dug in a neighboring ridge, on left of the trail, about 400 yards from it. Dry clay and gravel, coarse white sand-stone on the next hill, afforded slabs to line it with, making a perfect vault. I saw three hours in the hot sun, and sculptured a head and foot stone; and filled the letters with blacking from the hub of a wheel. . . . I then organized a funeral procession . . . with music.

Then follows the sad lament:

On the banks of the Platte,—  
With its flow'ry mat,—  
A corral and Camp were made;—  
And the sick was borne,  
To his tent that morn,—  
To die on that distant glade!—

<sup>54</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *Overland in Forty-Nine*, Detroit, 1896, pp. 41-43.

<sup>55</sup> David Dewolf, *Typescript Diary*, in family possession.

*Fort Laramie*

Courtesy Columbia University Press.

Sketch of adobe-walled Fort Laramie, made on July 11, 1849, by J. Goldsborough Bruff. See text. Contrast the angle of this view with that of the sketch made by the anonymous Mounted Rifleman, also herewith reproduced.

On July 9 the Bruff train rolled up to the Laramie, blocked up the wagon beds, and forded. The journal gives a most vivid picture of the situation at that time:

. . . Several hundred yards back from the river's bank, on the right, stood the old adobe walls of Fort Platte, the original post of the fur traders, now in ruin; and looks like an old Castle. . . .

After crossing, I directed the train to continue on to the left, on the trail to Ft. Laramie a couple of miles off, and camp in the bottom close by: (Tolerable grass) and proceeded to the right to a Camp of American Fur trade[r]s and Indians. [The temporary camp set up after Fort John was turned over to the military.] Here I was welcomed very kindly, and most courteously by Mr. Husband. . . . [He] informed me that he had a letter for me, but which some 10 days ago, he had turned over to the Officer at the Fort, who was acting as Post Master. . . .

July 10: . . . I spent the forenoon at the Fort. Maj. Simons [Sanderson] treated me most kindly; and on enquiry for the letter, Mr. Husband said was there for me, found that some days ago, a man belonging to a Company from Tennessee or Kentucky, had enquired for and obtained it! Had to send the mules up the Laramie river, 5 miles, under a guard, to graze.

July 11: . . . Dined at the Fort, with the Major. Had the pleasure of seeing Lt. Woodbury of the Engineers. Sketched the fort. . . .

Fort Laramie is an extensive rectangular structure of adobe. It forms an open area within—houses and balconies against the walls. Heavy portals and watch tower, and square bastions at 2 angles, enfiling the faces of the main walls. It has suffered much from time and neglect. . . . After bidding my kind friends farewell, I shouldered my gun, to walk over the hills alone, to reach the camp of my company.

A few hundred yards from the fort, after rising a sand hill, the trail passes through a burial ground of the Traders, and mountaineers. . . .

Laramie Peak stood up boldly on my left. . . .<sup>56</sup>

The next day, July 12, the establishment was honored by the arrival of Capt. Howard Stansbury and Lieut. J. W. Gunnison, of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, commissioned to explore and survey the valley of the Great Salt Lake of Utah, and to report on the state of affairs in that new Mormon community. The pages from Stansbury's private journal are far more illuminating than the well known published report:

Thursday, July 12 . . . after a march of 13 miles crossed Laramie fork and drove up to this Fort. Called upon Major Sanderson and paid respects. Dined at the mess. Lt. Woodbury and Captain Rhett the QrMr were absent hunting. Encamped just above the fort. Below us is a company of mounted rifles. . . . The Laramie river is quite a rapid stream about 3 feet deep where the wagons crossed which was just opposite and [sic] old adobe Fort now abandoned. The American Fur Companys peo[pl]e are encamped on the left bank having sold out Ft. Laramie to the Govt. for \$4,000.

Friday, July 13. . . . Engaged all day in repacking the wagons, overhauling provisions and making arrangements for the march to Fort Hall. . . Lt. Woodbury called. . . .

Saturday, July 14. Morning bright and pleasant. . . . Engaged in writing to Dept. . . . Arranging the loading a new, dividing the provisions into messes &c &c. Opened the two barometers belonging to the Smithsonian Institution and found them to be in perfect order and very correct. . . . Sent it up to the Fort in care of Lieut. Woodbury. . . . Lt. Gunnison engaged in making observations for time and for latitude. . . . Singing in the evening. . . .

Sunday, July 15. Slept late this morning as usual on Sundays. Capt. Duncan of the Rifles who is encamped with his Compy just below us, came and called this morning and invited the Dr. and myself to his quarters. . . . Writing reading and lazing all day. . . .<sup>57</sup>

Reverting to the published report:

Wednesday, July 18. . . . We continued our journey this morning. The next place we shall meet with a human habitation will be Fort Bridger, on Black's Fork of Green River, distant about four hundred miles.

Thursday, July 19. . . . We passed today the nearly consumed fragments of about a dozen wagons, that had been broken up and burned by their owners; and near them was piled up, in one heap, from six to eight hundred weight of bacon. . . . Boxes, bonnets, trunks, wagon-wheels, whole wagon bodies, cooking utensils, and, in fact, almost every article of household furniture were found from place to place along the prairie. . . . In the evening Captain Duncan, of the Rifles, with a small escort, rode into camp. He had

<sup>56</sup> Read and Gaines, op. cit., Gold Rush, pp. 30-39.

<sup>57</sup> Original journal scheduled for publication, to be edited by Dale Morgan, Salt Lake City, Utah.

left Fort Laramie in the morning, and was in hot pursuit of four deserters, who had decamped with an equal number of the best horses belonging to the command. . . .<sup>58</sup>

By this date the emigrant flood had fallen off sharply. Late comers were taking the gamble that the Reed-Donner party had taken and lost, of beating the snow in the Sierra Nevadas. As early as June 23 one correspondent of the **Missouri Republican** had reported from Fort Kearny that,

. . . The great California caravan has at length swept past this point, and the prairies are beginning to resume their wonted state of quiet and loneliness. Occasionally . . . a solitary wagon may be seen hurrying on like a buffalo on the outskirts of a band, but all the organized, as well as disorganized companies have cut loose from civilization, and are pushing towards the Pacific. . . . At a moderate calculation, there are 20,000 persons and 60,000 animals now upon the road between this point and Fort Hall . . . can this vast crowd succeed in crossing the mountains safely? It cannot. . . .<sup>59</sup>

Another correspondent writes from Fort Laramie on July 21:

According to statistics kept by an intelligent gentlemen . . . 5,500 wagons with 3½ people per wagon passed; number of deaths from the Missouri river to this point, one and a half per mile a low estimate. . . .<sup>60</sup>

On August 1 another belated emigrant reported a significant change in the situation at the Fort:

. . . The old fort is now used for store-houses, stables,&c, and after the completion of the new one, which is to be erected in the immediate vicinity, will doubtless be used for stables solely. . . .

This taxpayer was critical of the plan of pretentious fixed forts, claiming that Kearny and Laramie had already cost over a million dollars. Since there are only 3,000 Indians in the country, it would be much more feasible to send out squadrons of mounted troops from Fort Leavenworth, each spring, foraging off the country. As it is,

. . . Each post is supplied with eight heavy 12-pound howitzers and ammunition enough to send all the red men of the Western Prairies to their happy hunting grounds forthwith.

Finally we learn what became of the displaced traders whom Stansbury and others reported to be loitering in the neighborhood of the Fort:

The American Fur Company, having sold Laramie, intend to erect a trading post at Scott's Bluffs, some forty miles below.<sup>61</sup>

In due course a new "Fort John" was indeed erected in the vicinity of the famous landmark, performing unspectacularly until 1852

<sup>58</sup> Capt. Howard Stansbury, *Exploration and Survey of the Valley of the Great Salt Lake, Washington, 1853*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>59</sup> *Missouri Republican*, August 5, 1849, reprinted in *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Vol. XX (1922)*, pp. 206-209.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

as a trading station for the barter of buffalo robes from the Indians, and the rehabilitation and resale of emigrant cattle. (The actual site, about eight miles south of the present headquarters of Scotts Bluff National Monument, was discovered in recent years.)<sup>62</sup>

On July 26 the small garrison was augmented by the appearance of Company C, Mounted Riflemen, 2 officers and 60 men, under command of Capt. Benjamin S. Roberts (who had won two brevets for gallant service in Mexico, was destined for similar recognition, as Major General, in the Civil War) and 1st Lieut. Washington L. Elliott (another potential Major General). Capt. Stewart Van Vliet, accompanying Roberts (also destined for a Major Generalship), replaced Rhett as Acting Quarter Master. On August 12 Company G, 6th Infantry, composed of 2 officers and 33 men, brought in a train of wagons from Fort Leavenworth. This outfit remained, completing the Fort Laramie garrison of 1849. (Lieut. Levi C. Bootes, in command of the Infantry, was to become brevetted three times for gallant service at Malvern Hill, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg.)<sup>63</sup> However, the most important newcomer at this time was Col. Aeneas Mackay, sent by the High Command to inspect the new post. His reports to Thomas Jesup, Quarter Master General, bring us up to date. In a communique of July 31, he describes the adobe work:

. . . It is a good deal in decay and needs repairs. Those the Engineers are employed in making and in addition have commenced the construction of quarters outside the walls, a part of which they expect to complete this fall and by crowding to shelter the whole command this winter. They have already a saw mill in operation, which begins to produce lumber very rapidly. . . .

Since my arrival here I have been much more favorably impressed with the advantages of this station than I had ever expected to be. Indeed the prejudices which appear to have existed in the mind of everybody in regard to it, have unjustly deprived it of the credit of many recommendations to which it is entitled. In comparison with Fort Kearny, it goes far beyond it in respect to almost every requisite; and under the care of the persevering and discreet officer who now has the command, I have no doubt that it will become a most comfortable and desirable station. . . .

. . . having arrived at the Termination of our Route, to take all the advantage possible of our retrograde movement, I have ordered Captain Easton with a portion of our party to return to Ft. Leav by the way of the Republican Fork and Kansas River . . . to make a critical examination of it. . . . For myself I prefer to return by the way of Ft. Pierre and the Missouri River to Ft. Leavenworth.<sup>64</sup>

In a report of August 14 Colonel Mackay indicates that Captain Easton has already proceeded by way of Republican Fork, but

<sup>62</sup> T. L. Green, *Nebraska History*, Vol. XV, 1 (January 1934), pp. 38-46; Vol. XIX, 3 (July 1938), 175-190.

<sup>63</sup> H. H. Bancroft, *History of Nevada, Colorado and Wyoming, 1540-1888*, San Francisco, 1890, pp. 690-691; War Department Archives, Fort Myer, Virginia (microfilm document No. 9).

<sup>64</sup> War Department Archives, Fort Myer, Virginia (microfilm document No. 11).



Courtesy Wyoming Historical Department.

**A remarkable on-the-spot photograph of soldiers drilling on the parade ground, in the 1880's, after Fort Laramie had passed the peak of its military usefulness.**

that he himself had been delayed as the result of an affair with a band of Sioux Indians:

The matter above alluded to is the murder of a young man named McDowell, who was at the time unarmed, waiting in the Road with the intention of joining a train of wagons . . . on its way to Salt Lake and near "Scotts Bluffs" about sixty miles below this where the . . . band of the Indian who committed the murder was then established. He approached McDowell with a loaded rifle and without any warning discharged the contents in his back and killed him on the spot. Returning to his lodge and boasting of his deed, the chiefs assembled and instantly put him to death. It being reported to Major Sanderson . . . he immediately proceeded with a force of Mounted Riflemen to their village, where he met many of their tribe, all the chiefs and leading men of which, disclaimed any previous knowledge of this shocking act, declared their entire friendship and attachment to the United States, and instanced the summary punishment of the felon as an evidence of their sincerity. The Indians however, were found to be in a state of great excitement. They had heard that the Fur Company was selling to the Government the trading establishment at this place, which they construed into the sale of the lands which they consider their special inheritance; and that by these means they would be eventually deprived of the indemnity, annuities &c which they had a right to expect from the United States . . . they had witnessed with amazement the columns of troops and the crowds of emigrants which had been pressing towards the West during the whole season; and with equal terror the frightful disease which they had bore with them and had already communicated to their people who were rapidly dying in many places of cholera, which they were told the whites had brought with them as a means of exterminating the whole Indian Race.

Under this impression, and having lost that morning his father by this scourge; in a gloomy fit, with the Indian superstition and belief full upon him, this savage determined that he would in recompense destroy a whiteman. . . .

It was feared that this feeling might be extended among the young men of the band over toward the Missouri, who were then coming in for a hunt; and especially on the route to Fort Pierre which I am to take; but it does not seem to be the case; and I am of opinion that it has subsided.<sup>66</sup>

Having thus reassured himself, Colonel Mackay proceeded without incident to Fort Pierre, an American Fur Company post on the Missouri, the present site of the South Dakota capital. He was accompanied by an escort of ten Riflemen commanded by Captain Van Vliet, "to keep the Sioux and other red gentlemen of the prairies from molesting his scalp," to use the language of an anonymous member of the escort. The Captain, in his report of September 20, submitted a map of the Fort Pierre Route, well-known to the fur traders, and deplored the lack of scientific instruments. He also was vastly annoyed by the resultant delay in getting

<sup>66</sup> Ibid (microfilm document No. 12).



Courtesy Wyoming Historical Department.

**Sutler's Store.** This photograph, made in 1938 by George Grant, shows the adobe section of the building which was begun in 1849 and the stone section (at right) which was completed in 1852. The *sutler* was the politically appointed civilian proprietor of the post store and saloon.



the command under cover before winter set in. However, a much more ominous situation confronted late emigrants. He reports:

Persons just in from the Mormon settlement of the Salt Lake represent that the great majority of the California emigrants cannot reach the gold country this year and will therefore be obliged to winter in the Valley. It is supposed that about three fourths of the whole emigration, that is, over 17,000 souls, will thus be thrown upon the Mormon population. Should such be the case great will be the suffering as the Mormons have barely sufficient to carry their own population through the winter—Many of the emigrants before they reached Salt Lake were carrying their all on their backs. Their teams died. [This] was caused by the leading Companies . . . burning the country beyond that point so as to render it impossible to find feed for animals.<sup>66</sup>

Undoubtedly, many emigrants were thrown upon the mercy of the Mormons, just as certainly as many of them likewise were forced to hibernate at Fort Laramie. (Writes one soldier, in April 1850: "The emigrants who passed the winter here—may Heaven never send us any more—. . . will [soon] be on the road to California.")<sup>67</sup> The rumor that thousands were stranded seems, however, to have been grossly exaggerated, as most rumors were bound to be along the Trail.

A letter of September 18 by an unidentified Rifleman also reflects this rumor, and supplements Captain Van Vliet's report in other respects:

All hands are driving away at our new buildings, and strong hopes are entertained that before the mercury is at zero we shall be round our new hearths.

We were visited, a few days since, by about two hundred Cheyennes and Sioux, who danced a little, stole a little, eat a great deal, and finally went on their way rejoicing. These Platte Sioux, by the way, are the best Indians on the prairies. Look at their conduct during the past summer. Of the vast emigration, which rolled through their country this year, not a person was molested, not an article stolen. Such good conduct deserves reward.

\* \* \*

Those grand rascals of the Plains, the Pawnees, have again been imbruing their hands in the blood of the whites. Two men—THOMAS and PICKARD—carrying the U. S. mail from Fort Hall to Fort Leavenworth, were attacked by them a few days since, about half way between this post and Fort Kearny, and it is feared that both were killed. Lt. DONALDSON, on his way to this post found the dead body of Thomas, and the hat of Picard stained with blood. Before he reached the spot he met a war party of Pawnees, who evinced by their actions that they were the perpetrators of the deed. Thomas' body had several arrows sticking in it. Lt. D. had but two or three teamsters with him, and he could only give the body a hasty burial without searching very thoroughly for the other man. These Pawnees have recently plundered some government wagons below Fort Kearny, and it is high time they should be brought to their senses. . . .<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Ibid (microfilm document Nos. 16 and 17).

<sup>67</sup> Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Vol. XX, p. 221.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pp. 214-216.



Courtesy Wyoming Historical Department.

**Old Bedlam, mentioned prominently in romantic novels of the period, was long used as quarters for the unmarried officers. The name was probably descriptive of its use as the center of social activities. Work was begun on this structure in 1849. This photograph was made by the U. S. A. Signal Corps in the 1880's.**

In mid-November a party of Mormon missionaries, traveling east from Salt Lake City to Kaneshville, reached the post, and reported:

On our arrival at Fort Laramie we obtained supplies . . . Those of our number who had passed this fort the present summer were astonished at the great improvements which have been made here in a few months' time. There is an air of quietness and contentment, of neatness and taste, which in connection with the kind of reception given by the polite and gentlemanly commander, Major Sanderson, made us feel as if we had found an oasis in the desert.<sup>69</sup>

In Major Sanderson's report of September 18, 1849, we find the prediction:

. . . the troops at this post will all be in good permanent quarters by the middle of November. One company will be quartered in the old building at present occupied by the officers and permanent quarters for the other two companies are at this time being erected and will be finished in time for the approaching winter. The building intended for the officers quarters is well under way, and will soon be finished . . .<sup>70</sup>

The Chief Engineer, in his annual report for 1849, seems equally optimistic:

The old adobe work called Fort Laramie has been purchased which has obviated the necessity of wasting time on temporary buildings.

The building now under way, and which are expected to be ready for use before winter, are, a two-story block of officers' quarters, containing 16 rooms; a block of soldiers' quarters, intended for one company, but which will be occupied by two during the coming winter; a permanent bakery, and two stables for one company each. . . .<sup>71</sup>

Later evidence suggests that none of the buildings listed were entirely completed before the onslaught of winter, but it is supposed that the partly finished structures, together with the ailing old adobe Fort, provided passable shelter for the garrison.

Thus ended the memorable year 1849 at old Fort Laramie, the beginning of over four decades of service as sentinel of the Plains, outpost of Federal sovereignty on the turbulent trans-Missouri frontier. The old adobe work was raided in the late 1850's to provide filler material for new construction, and the last trace of it had disappeared by 1870 when an officers' quarters was superimposed on the site. (Nothing now remains of the traders' era except archeological data, yet to be unearthed.) Meanwhile, new buildings, of adobe and logs and frame and lime-concrete, evolved around a parade ground area which was designed squarely with the original adobe post. After the Fort was abandoned in 1890, many buildings were dismantled by local ranchers, and time has done its work on the survivors. Among these, however, are two century-

<sup>69</sup> Mormon Church Archives, cited by Hafen and Ghent, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>70</sup> War Department Archives, Adjutant General's Office, File Case 10.

<sup>71</sup> Senate Executive Documents, 31st Congress, 1st Session, No. 1, Part 1, p. 225.

old buildings, the oldest ones in the Central Plains region, which stand as venerable monuments to "the year of transition." These are the "two-story block of officers' quarters" of brick-lined frame (now minus the old kitchen wings) mentioned in the Chief Engineer's report, which became known as "Old Bedlam," and the adobe section of the sutler's store building, not mentioned in any official report, but equally important as a focal point in post history. Both structures were started in 1849, completed in 1850.<sup>72</sup> Around both has been woven a colorful fabric of frontier tradition. Both have witnessed the pageant of the West from the day of Indian travois, traders' mackinaw, and emigrants' covered wagon to the day of steam locomotive, Ford V-8, and jet-propelled strato-plane. Both will be preserved as memorials to the glorious epic of the Forty-Niners and old Fort Laramie.

<sup>72</sup> Jess H. Lombard, "Old Bedlam," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 1941), pp. 87-91; Merrill J. Mattes, "The Sutler's Store at Fort Laramie," *Annals of Wyoming*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (July 1946), pp. 93-138; also, "Surviving Army Structures," Manuscript, files of the National Park Service.



