



Women of the Frontier



Women of Frontier Army Posts

The women who accompanied their Army husbands to Fort Larned were a unique, devoted, and courageous group of individuals. Many coming by covered wagon or stage coach from posh upbringings back East, they soon found themselves faced with the unexpected challenges of life on the Kansas prairie. Some women came to the Fort expecting there to be servants only to find that they themselves were expected to “hold down the fort.” It was necessary for the wives to handle chores and finances on their own while husbands were away for weeks or months at a time.

The wives soon learned to do without many of the staples they were accustomed to such as eggs, potatoes and

fresh vegetables and began to improvise when cooking. Women quickly became resourceful in other ways as well as they were faced with the presence of snakes, the challenges of the scorching hot summers, unrelenting winds, bitterly cold winters, and the Native American Indians who would look in through their windows and at times walk into their homes uninvited and sit down.

Alongside their new responsibilities, the wives found they had also gained a new voice. Although they were not yet allowed to vote, women began sharing their views more openly with their husbands about topics such as politics and prohibition and quickly became a stabilizing force at the Fort.

Recreation and Hobbies

Although arrival at Fort Larned brought a new set of challenges for officers’ wives, it also came with new-found freedoms. While many women of the Fort still enjoyed the traditional hobbies of the time such as crocheting, knitting, quilting, drawing, painting, gardening, cooking, reading and writing, they found themselves with new opportunities as well.

Away from the social expectations of their homes back East, women were

free to explore their environment in ways not previously allowed. Officers’ wives found themselves fishing, hunting, and even accompanying their husbands on patrol riding horses astride rather than side-saddle.

The wives of Officers’ Row also enjoyed getting together and playing crochet, cards, bocce ball, piano, having tea with one another, and planning parties for events and holidays.

Women’s Attire

The fact that the women of Fort Larned were many miles away from society did not stop them from dressing modestly. Dresses, hats, and gloves were worn at all times while out of the officers’ quarters. Women’s attire consisted of split

drawers which came to the knee or ankle, a chemise (similar to a slip), stockings which came to the knee and were accompanied by garters, a corset, at least one modesty petticoat and/or hoop petticoat, and a dress.

Women of the U.S. Army

The only females recognized by a contract with the US Army during the 1860s and 1870s were laundresses. They were responsible for laundering all of the clothing for the officers and enlisted men at Fort Larned.

Laundresses lived on Suds Row, a row of sod adobe buildings behind the barracks and were well paid making \$40 per month doing laundry for 19 ½ soldiers on average with extra pay for sewing on buttons and chevrons.

Alice Dryer



Alice Dryer was the wife of Major Hiram Dryer of the 13th U.S. Infantry who took command at Fort Larned December 4, 1865. While at Fort Larned, word came of a sixteen-year-old girl who had been taken captive by American Indians when her entire family of emigrants had been massacred. Mrs. Dryer demanded that a trade of food and supplies be made with the American Indians for the girl's rescue. Once the trade was complete, the girl, who said she had been treated well by the Indians, was brought to Mrs. Dryer.

Once at the fort, Mrs. Dryer washed the dirt and paint from the girl's face and made new clothing for her to wear. The girl stayed with the Dryers for a short time until an opportunity arrived for the girl to be safely returned to her home state of Iowa.

Many years later, Mrs. Dryer made the trip to Davenport, Iowa to visit the girl and was pleased to have found that the girl had married a wealthy man and was living quite comfortably in a large home and had a daughter of her own.

Cathay Williams



Born to an enslaved mother and a free father in 1844, Cathay Williams began life as a slave. In 1861 at the beginning of the Civil War, Williams, age 17, was taken by Union Forces as collateral and required to work as a cook and a laundress. On November 15, 1866, Cathay Williams became the first African-American woman to enlist in the United States Regular Army by posing as a man. Under the false name "William Cathay", Williams was assigned to the 38th Infantry, an all African-American regiment.

Shortly after enlisting, Williams fell ill with smallpox and was hospitalized numerous times over the next two years as a result of the illness, heat, and wear on her body. When a doctor finally realized that Williams was a woman, she was honorably discharged on October 14, 1886. After her discharge from the US Army, Williams signed up with an all-black regiment that would eventually become part of the Buffalo Soldiers. Williams spent the last years of her life as a seamstress in Trinidad, Colorado and passed away in 1893 at the age of 50.

Libbie Custer



Elizabeth "Libbie" Bacon was born to a wealthy Michigan family in 1842, the daughter of Daniel Bacon, a judge and state senator. During her childhood, Libbie lost three siblings and her mother prior to her teen years. After graduating at the top of her girls' seminary class, Libbie married Brevet brigadier general George Armstrong Custer of the United States Army.

Shortly after their February 1864 wedding, Custer was asked to cut his honeymoon short and report for duty. Libbie, who was terrified of being away from her husband, insisted that he bring her with him. At that moment, Libbie Custer left behind

everything that she had been accustomed to for a new, far less comfortable life.

During their twelve-year marriage, Libbie accompanied her husband while he served in the Overland Campaign, Shenandoah Valley, Cedar Creek, and Appomattox. George Custer was killed in the battle known as "Custer's Last Stand" on June 25, 1876 during the Battle of the Little Bighorn.

After Custer's death, Libbie faced financial difficulties and began making speaking engagements and writing about her late husband. She wrote three books honoring her husband including *Boots and Saddles*, *Tenting on the Plains*, and *Following the Guidon* and amassed a good deal of money in doing so.

Frances M.A. Roe



Frances M. A. Mack was born in Watertown, New York August 22, 1846 and married Lieutenant Colonel Fayette Washington Roe of the U.S. Army on August 19, 1871.

Frances accompanied her husband anywhere the Army sent him including Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming. She was eager to learn how to ride a horse and shoot a gun much like the soldiers did. Frances became an excellent horseman, very successful trout fisherman, and even went along with

the men to hunt birds, deer, buffalo, and antelope. While stationed at Old Fort Zarah in Kansas April, 1872, Frances adopted a greyhound puppy whom she named Harold. Hal, as the dog was nicknamed, became a beloved companion and aside from a year apart, stayed by her side until he passed away in March of 1878.

During her time as an Army wife, Frances frequently wrote letters which became her popular book *Army Letters from an Officer's Wife 1871-1888* which was originally published in 1909.