



Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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POST SOUTH LOUP FORK

by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Post South Loup Fork was a small army post established in 1865 in the northeastern part of Buffalo County not far from the present city of Ravenna. Known locally as Fort Banishment or Fort Desolation, the military post was built and manned by troops from Fort Kearny, twenty miles to the south. Its purpose was to keep an eye on the actions of the Indians in this uninhabited area and to protect workers as the railroads planned and laid out their lines westward across this wilderness land.

What is now Buffalo County was the home and hunting grounds of the Pawnee Indians. The home of the Sioux was a little farther west, but close enough for them to fight the peaceable Pawnee tribes for hunting grounds and to steal their horses. When settlers began to come into the area along the Platte River, the Pawnee, who were never a match in battle with the Sioux, were glad to be on friendly terms with the white settlers.

Prior to 1864 there were no settlers in Buffalo County except a few on the Wood River. When the Civil War broke out and troops were withdrawn from Fort Kearny and other protective forts, the Indians became unruly. The large numbers of travelers on the trails invading their hunting grounds, and the planned building of the railroad along the Platte valley, added fuel to the fire.

Little official information is presently available regarding Post South Loup Fork. It was established in May of 1865 and closed in October of the same year, and was garrisoned by Company E of the Seventh Iowa Cavalry during that time.

S. C. Bassett, one of the Gibbon colonists, visited the site in 1871, six years later. In his *History of Buffalo County*, published in 1916, he wrote the following account,
(Continued on Page 3)



Sketch by Barb Avery of the log cabin as it will look on the Trails & Rails Museum grounds.

WITH THE SOCIETY

A Message from the President:

I would like to share a few exciting plans for upcoming events the remainder of this year and into the spring of next.

First of all, please mark your calendars for two very important dates in the next month: AUGUST 1 and AUGUST 20. The August 1st meeting is targeted as the first official Museum Committee meeting. This committee will be the brainstorming group behind the matters pertaining to the museum only. We welcome new faces and new ideas. Please plan to be at the Old Depot at Trails & Rails Museum, 6:30 p.m. Monday, August 1.

AUGUST 20th will be the first meeting of the annual WAGONS WEST committee. The meeting will be held in the Old Depot at 6:00 p.m. We are looking at making the 1991 event a very large 2-day affair. The theme will be Chautauqua (for adults and a Junior Chautauqua.) We will also be sponsoring a Bluegrass Festival in conjunction with the Chautauqua. So, as you can see, we will definitely need ideas, AND LOTS AND LOTS OF HELP!! Bring a brown bag supper and join your board for the initial WAGONS WEST meeting. An event this large needs to begin now.

The main objective this year for the Buffalo County Historical Society is to PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE. But, to get the word out, we will need everyone. Please offer a hand when a committee chairman calls on you. It takes more than just a few good people to make an organization like the Buffalo County Historical Society work and flourish in the future.

I would like to remind our members that our Board meetings are open to all of you. So for those of you who might wish to sit in on them, please do not hesitate. Our next Board Meeting is set for August 7, at 7:00 p.m. at the Old Depot.

Susan C. Lynch

September Fun(d) Day is Sunday, September 15. Mardi Anderson is chairman of this event at Trails & Rails Museum starting at 1:00 p.m. The annual Buffalo Ringers horseshoe tournament will be held, and there will be a kick-off of fund raising for the roof of the log cabin being moved to the museum grounds.

A special feature of the day will be displays of personal collections in the various buildings on the museum grounds. If you have a unique collection to share, please contact Mardi at 237-7339 after 6:00 p.m.

Memorial Gifts have been received from the following members and friends:

- A. B. Kriz in memory of Leona Kriz
- Mr. and Mrs. Glen Wintermute in memory of Elmer Wiles
- Marvin and Eileen Basnett in memory of Albert Gross
- Mrs. Frances Link in memory of Albert Gross

NEW LIFE MEMBERS

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referring to the post as "Fort Banishment":

The Union Pacific Railroad was completed across Buffalo County in the years 1866-67. Some of the tribes of Indians, more especially the Sioux in Northwestern Nebraska, were not friendly to the building of the railroad and in order to protect the workmen the general government stationed troops in the territory to the north and small army posts—forts they were called locally—were built for the comfort and convenience of the troops. One of these frontier posts was located on the south bank of the South Loup River in the center of Section 16, Township 12, Range 14. In the month of June, 1871, the writer (Mr. Bassett) and a considerable number of colonists who had, in April, settled on claims in the vicinity of Gibbon, visited the South Loup country in order to view the land, there being no settlers in the northern part of Buffalo County at that date. The company camped for the night at the point where was located this post known as Fort Banishment. The earthworks—rifle pits—extended, in the form of a square, from the bank of the river to the south. Within the enclosure were two buildings constructed of oak logs, one for the soldiers, the other for their horses; the roofs were of poles and willow brush covered with sod and dirt. It is recalled that nailed on the outer walls of the buildings were a score or more of the feet of timber wolves, the feet being much larger than the feet of coyotes. It might be mentioned that below the fort, on the south side of the river, was an island embracing several acres, and on this island—thus protected from prairie fires—was a considerable growth of oak, yellow and black, many of the trees from two to three feet in diameter. It seemed that the trees to build the fort came from this island, access to which was by means of a beaver-dam bridge over which could be driven teams with loaded wagons. . . . Much timber, cottonwood and oak, along the South Loup, of a size suitable for ties, had been cut and used in the building of the railroad.

An incident in Hall County's history refers to "Fort Desolation". The first settlers of Hall County were members of a German Colony of some two hundred inhabitants who came in 1857 and settled about two miles south of present Grand Island. As protection from the Indians a block house was constructed and the O.K. Store was fortified. Around all the buildings an earthen wall was erected. "Fort Independence" was the name given to this fortification. Although well supplied generally, they lacked weapons and appealed to the territorial government for arms and ammunition. Andreas, *History of Buffalo County*, 1882, gives the following account:

"On August 22, 1864, Maj. Gen. Curtis arrived with a cavalry regiment and one ten-pound cannon. The General inspected the fortifications and praised the settlers for their skill in the work. Believing the settlement at Grand Island to be safe, Gen. Curtis pushed on to Fort Kearny . . . Soon after the visit of Gen. Curtis, a detachment of twenty men, of Company E, Seventh Iowa Cavalry, under Capt. J. B. David, was stationed at the fortification at the "O.K. Store," to help protect the settlement . . . there was never any attack. There were, however, a great many depredations committed by the soldiers themselves. Several of them took grain and cattle by force and it was impossible to secure their punishment . . . There was general happiness throughout the settlement when they were afterwards ordered away to a station on the Loup River, familiarly known among the old settlers and soldiers as Fort Desolation on account of the loneliness of the station, there being no settlement

in the region.”

William Stolley, one of the leaders of the German Colony above referred to, corroborates the story, writing that “Captain Davis and his men were ordered away from here and had to set up camp about thirty-five miles up the South Loup River in the wilderness . . . at that time this place was generally called Fort Desolation.”

Yet another name for the fort is found in one of the army reports of July 1865 where reference is made to “Camp Conner.” General Patrick Conner was then in charge of the Military District of the Plains, which included Fort Kearny and Post South Loup Fork.

In 1866 when the Burlington surveyed the land over which their railroad line would be laid twenty years later, the surveyor noted on the survey plat, “deserted soldiers’ quarters.”

Ravenna people knew about the old fort and generally called it Fort Banishment. It was there before Erastus Smith settled on Beaver Creek in 1874 and before the town was founded in 1886. The old fort grounds at the bend of the river just south of town was a scenic place, a place for swimming, for school picnics and other outdoor gatherings. Children loved to play around the sod embankments. A few artifacts have been found over the years—a bullet, shell casing, percussion cap, mule shoe nail, and square nails. Erosion from floods gradually destroyed the fort site, and finally, the flood of 1947 took away the little evidence remaining that there had been a military post at that place.

T. H. McClintock, who later came to Litchfield, had been a member of Company E, Seventh Iowa Cavalry stationed at the fort. In an article in the *Ravenna News* of May 18, 1894, he relates that in the spring of 1864 the Company commenced the building of the sod fortification. He further stated that:

Company E was one of the companies stationed at that time at Fort Kearny. As punishment for stealing a barrel of commissary whisky and

**Cavalry Uniform of the 1860's
at Fort Kearny.**



declaring mutiny, the Company was banished to the then barren and desolate region of the South Loup. The Company was required to stay four months and thoroughly scout the Loup Country which at that time was infested by a large number of hostile Indians.

The men suffered great privations and their lives were in constant danger. The only man of the Company who was killed by the Indians, however, was M. S. Grubb, Mr. McClintock's bunk mate and intimate friend. Grubb was killed by Indians near Buckeye Valley, which was between here (Ravenna) and Gibbon while on his way to Fort Kearny with the mail.

Similar accounts have been related by others as to the men assigned to duty at the outpost, and as to the killing of Mr. Grubb while in service at the fort. The military installation has been described as an "emergency" post, as an "outpost for disciplinary purposes", and as "sort of a penal colony, and soldiers guilty of infraction of the rules . . . were detailed for duty at Fort Desolation or Fort Banishment." The official name of Post South Loup Fork was apparently unknown, at least never used, locally.

Despite its various names, differences in descriptions of its construction, and variations in the dates of use as a military post, the fort is a part of Buffalo County's rich history that should be remembered. S. C. Bassett, who wrote several newspaper articles about the fort before his published *History of Buffalo County* in 1916, said it well in a *Ravenna News* column of April 12, 1895, "And Old Fort Banishment—why permit its name and location to sink into oblivion? While as a Fort it is hardly worthy of mention, yet it is a milestone marking the end of the reign of the wild animals and still wilder men in the valley of the Loup and the Beaver, and the coming of the home builders with their ways of enterprise, thrift, peace and civilization."

SOURCES

Bassett, *History of Buffalo County*, 1916, pp. 259-260, Andreas, *History of Nebraska*, 1882, p. 933, Stolley, *History of the First Settlement of Hall County, Nebraska*, pp. 53-57; *The Ravenna News*, May 18, 1894, Apr. 12, 1895; Aug. 12, 1904; Sept. 13, 1906, July 5, 1907, Oct. 4, 1912, Oct. 30, 1914; Stout, *History of Company E First Nebraska Cavalry*; Jenkins, *A Place called Banishment*; Interviews with John Ludwickson, Highway Archeologist, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lois Johnsten of Ravenna, *Tales of Buffalo County*, Vol. I, pp. 10-13; Archives of State Historical Society and Buffalo County Historical Society.

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Author's Note: The story of Post South Loup Fork is written as the Buffalo County Historical Society is preparing to place on the grounds of the Trails & Rails Museum an interpretive exhibit detailing the history of the post.

The Society has accepted a log cabin of the 1860-70 period from Mrs. Mary Snow, who donated the cabin plus funds to move it to the museum grounds. The gift is given as a memorial to Mrs. Snow's brother, the late Paul Tockey, who saved the cabin from destruction.

The history of the cabin, like the history of the military post, is in bits and pieces. The cabin appears to have been on the Jasper Eggers homestead in Hall County when the homestead papers were filed in May of 1872. The size of the oak logs indicates that it was built before the Union Pacific was built in 1866-67 across Nebraska. (In building the Union Pacific every tree had been cut down which was large enough to be used for railroad ties.) The particular kind of oak from which the logs are made is native to the South Loup area where the post was located.

The cabin on the museum grounds will be a fine interpretive exhibit of a structure "like" the one at Post South Loup Fork, and will provide a place to show and tell the local history of this short-lived military post in Buffalo County.

MUSEUM HAPPENINGS

Trails & Rails Museum is having a good summer. When you come to visit or as a volunteer to sit in the afternoon, be sure to see the Indian Garden and the quilts. Our attendance has been excellent.

We are open 1:00 to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday; 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Monday, and 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. the rest of the week, so come and bring your friends and guests. There is a requested donation after 5:00 p.m. for all non-members. Several new items have been added to the gift shop and you may want to investigate this.

The display committee is working on a medical display. If you have anything to contribute — stories, history, or any kind of material, it will be welcome.

The tour to Iowa was a success. Everybody reported a good time. Many other things have been happening. The foundation is being prepared for a log cabin from the Ravenna area. A new roof will be put on as soon as the cabin is moved on the grounds.

Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Museum Director

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
 - Institutional Membership \$15.00
 - Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Directors

- Term expiring June 1, 1992: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Mike Stauffer, all of Kearney; Chad Anderson of Amherst
- Term expiring June 1, 1993: Alice Howell, Elmer Holzrichter, Susan C. Lynch, all of Kearney; Viola Livingston of Gibbon
- Term expiring June 1, 1994: Howard Kolbo, Mardi Anderson, Lois Rahmann, all of Kearney; Jim Cudaback of Riverdale

Officers (1 year term)

- President Susan C. Lynch
- Vice-President Jim Cudaback
- Secretary Alice Howell
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Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

Buffalo County Historical Society
Box 523
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