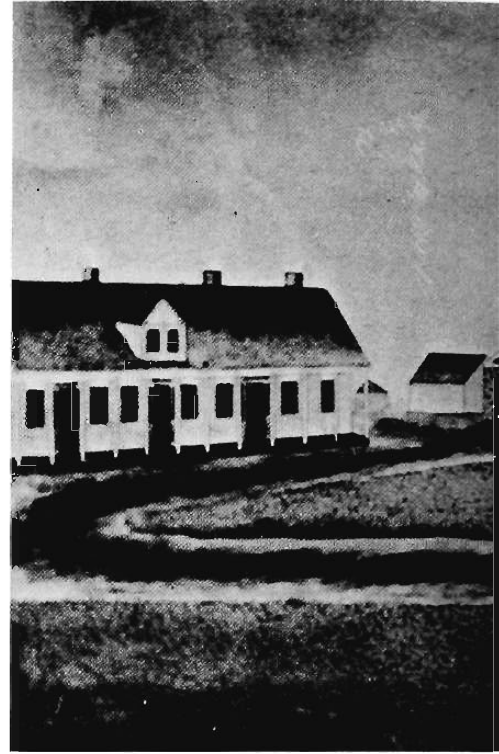


# A Frontier Fort in Peacetime

G. Hubert Smith

*THIS DRAWING of Fort Ridgely is thought to have been made in 1864 by August Haarfeldt of the Third Minnesota Battery of Light Artillery.*



THE AUTHOR of this posthumous article was associated with the Minnesota Historical Society from about 1935 to 1950. He was curator of the society's museum from 1946 through 1949. Smith also was a "well known figure in historical archaeology and local history throughout the Middle West and Plains." These words were part of a tribute written by Alan Woolworth, chief of archaeology for the Minnesota Historical Society, for the *Plains Anthropologist* (May, 1974) a little more than two years after Smith's death in March, 1972.

One of the archaeological endeavors for which Smith was known was directing excavations of the sites of buildings at Fort Ridgely in 1936 and 1937. His report, "Excavating the Site of Old Fort Ridgely," appeared in *Minnesota History* in June, 1939. He also wrote many other articles for this quarterly and other publications. It is thought that the following article, centering on the human side of the fort's history, was also written in the late 1930s. Woolworth found the article in 1973 when looking through Smith's papers concerning the Ridgely excavation and called it to the editor's attention. Its richness of detail from out-of-the-way sources prompted in part the decision to publish it in this issue. Although the article is basically as Smith left it, it has been shortened somewhat, edited lightly, and updated to a degree in annotation. A few sources the editor was unable to locate.

After leaving the society in 1949, Smith became a staff member of the Missouri Basin Project, River Basin Surveys, Smithsonian Institution, during 1951 and

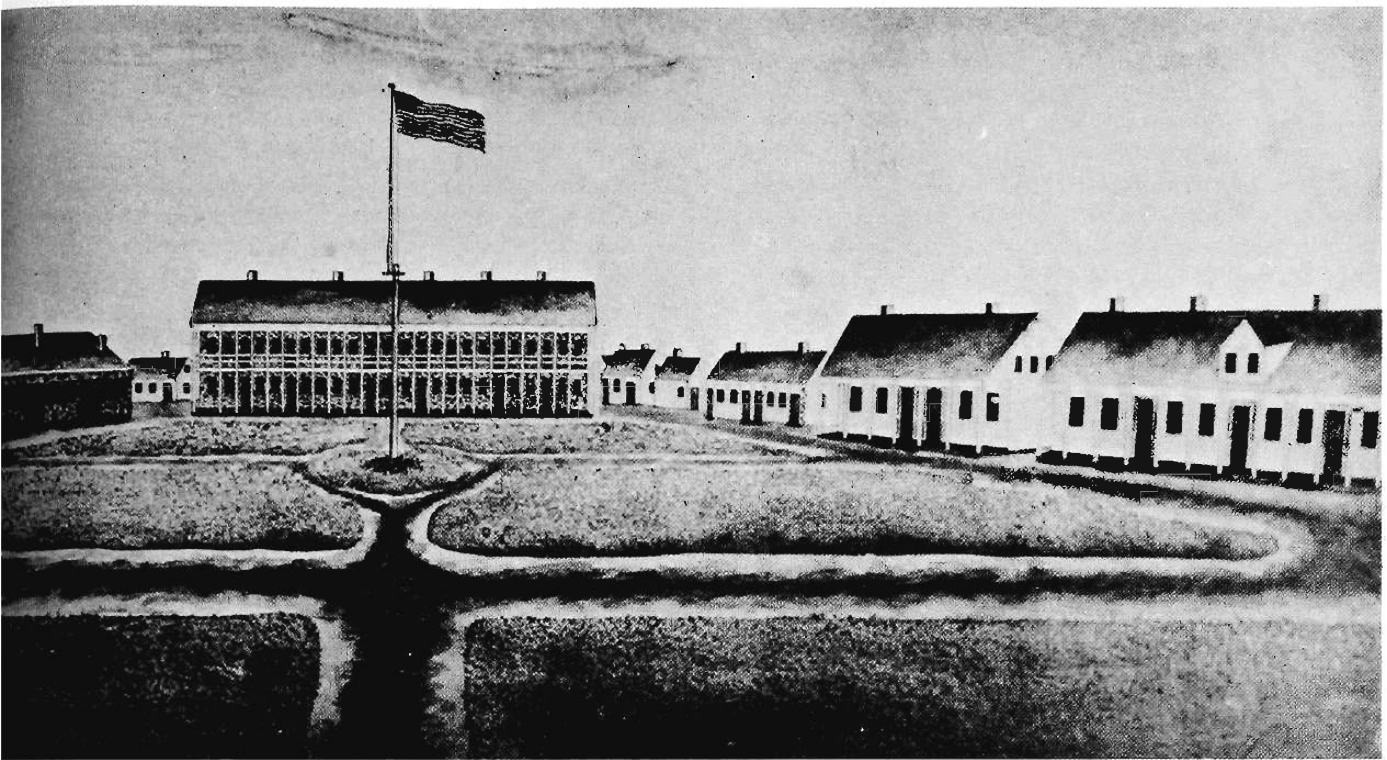
remained with this project the rest of his professional career. The family granted permission to publish this article in *Minnesota History*. — Ed.

FORT RIDGELY sits on a high plateau on the northeast side of the Minnesota River some sixteen miles upstream from present-day New Ulm. During the Sioux Uprising of 1862 the fort swarmed for a time with refugees, many wounded and many distraught from harrowing experiences. The Sioux attacked the fort twice — on August 20 and again on August 22 — and were repulsed both times. The fort's role as a focal point of the 1862 uprising is well known and has been discussed many times. Less familiar are the fort's years before and after the war, and this article concentrates on them.<sup>1</sup>

The fort was built by the federal government in 1853 in response to the shifting military and Indian frontiers. The initial suggestion for such a post was made by Henry H. Sibley when he was territorial delegate in Congress. In a letter he wrote during the summer of 1852 to General Winfield Scott, commander in chief, Sibley pointed out the "importance, and indeed necessity," of military

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<sup>1</sup> Among readily accessible accounts of the defense of Fort Ridgely are: William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2:126-133 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1961); Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*, 25-31 (St. Paul, revised edition, 1976); [Cynthia A. Matson], *Fort Ridgely: A Journal of the Past* (St. Paul, 1972); and Oscar G. Wall, *Recollections of the Sioux Massacre*, 88-106 ([Lake City], 1908).



protection on the upper Minnesota River in view of the presence in the area of large numbers of Sioux as a result of the treaties of 1851. Sibley saw that Fort Snelling was no longer valuable as "a defensive work against Indian aggressions" and felt that Fort Ripley, although regarded by many officers as a more suitable site for a post, might have been of greater use had it been established some miles lower down the Mississippi. Should his proposal for a new post on the Minnesota find favor, he offered the opinion that the necessary buildings would not be expensive to construct and suggested that the fort might be garrisoned by troops from Fort Snelling. The most advantageous location would be near the lower or eastern boundary of the new Indian reservation, where timber for building and other purposes was abundant. This position was central and was accessible by steamer in high water; thus the transportation of supplies would be easy and inexpensive. Sibley said that prompt execu-

tion of the plan was necessary if the fort were to effect the end for which it was designed. His letter bore the endorsements of various congressmen from Iowa and Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup>

Sibley's proposal was approved. Instructions were issued in September, 1852, to the commanding officer of the Western Military Department in St. Louis to appoint a competent board to select a site for the post, "embracing as far as possible the usual advantages of health, water and materials for building purposes." The board, duly appointed, made the required inspection and returned its report in December. In March, 1853, orders were sent for necessary arrangements to be made for the earliest practicable establishment of the post. This order was accomplished on April 29, and the first commandant, Captain James Monroe, wrote the next day from "Rock-point, Upper Minnesota River," that Companies C and K of the United States Sixth Infantry, which had been assigned to the new post, had arrived from Fort Snelling the previous evening and were encamped at the site. "A boat of the largest class employed on the Upper Mississippi," the steamer "West Newton," transported the troops to the site and found no difficulty in navigating the Minnesota, which, though high, was usually somewhat higher in the spring.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Minnesota River had been navigated for some years, this was a point higher upstream than had thus far been reached by steamboat. The distance from Fort Snelling to the new fort site by water was estimated at 250 miles, while the most direct practicable

<sup>2</sup>Sibley to Scott, July 12, 1852, copy in "Fort Ridgely, Minnesota," an anonymous manuscript in the division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society. The latter was compiled, possibly by one Jasper W. Johnson, in the adjutant general's office in Washington, D.C., in 1878. It includes copies of special orders and personal letters of military personnel who served at the fort.

<sup>3</sup>"Fort Ridgely, Minnesota" (quotes). An extensive account of Fort Ridgely by Fred W. Johnson was published in the *Fairfax Standard* from September 7 to December 28, 1933. See also Benjamin H. Randall, *Fort Ridgely, Minnesota* (Fairfax, 1896), a revision of an article originally published in the *Winona Republican* in 1892.

land route was about 100 miles. On May 20, 1853, Company E of the Sixth Infantry arrived overland from Fort Dodge, Iowa, thus completing the original assignment of troops. The following day Brevet Major Samuel Woods, who had led an expedition from Fort Snelling to Pembina, in 1849, assumed command. On June 27 the post was named Fort Ridgely, probably in honor of Captain Randolph Ridgely, a hero of the Mexican War (and possibly also for two other officers named Ridgely who died in that war).<sup>4</sup>

In accordance with the War Department's original plans for stone buildings, the commissary and barracks were built of native granite the first year. Then the plans were revised to erect all the remaining buildings of wood. The fort was substantially completed by 1855, but it never had a stockade or blockhouses or a well.<sup>5</sup>

It is the purpose of this article, however, to present glimpses of life at the fort in peacetime, not to give technical details of the post's construction. It is significant that the chief means of transportation was by water when the fort was established. The proposed site was recommended as being accessible by water, though the distance by land from St. Paul was much shorter. Roads for transportation of heavy supplies were lacking in 1853. Only with the arrival of settlers did roads come into being through state and federal appropriations. As late as 1856, however, heavy goods destined for the fort were forwarded there by water from Henderson. During the previous summer, more than fifty tons of freight per week are said to have been shipped by water to the fort. That this amount was of commercial importance is clear from the fact that it exceeded the combined shipments to all other points on the Minnesota River. This means of transportation was, however, costly. In 1855 the cost to the government of carrying goods to the fort by water was estimated at about \$12,000, and it was constantly urged that wagon roads be completed to Ridgely because of the advantage of lower transportation costs by land.<sup>6</sup>

Such wagon roads, besides those constructed by the territory and state, were provided for by acts of Congress from 1856 to 1867. They connected the fort with St. Cloud, Traverse des Sioux, St. Peter, New Ulm, the Sioux agencies, and Chippewa City (which became Montevideo). The most extensive road plan was for a wagon route for emigrants from Fort Ridgely to famed South Pass through the Rocky Mountains near what is now Lander, Wyoming, and thence through Nobles Pass of the Sierra Nevada Range to points in California. The road was to be surveyed and constructed under Indian Office jurisdiction and with William H. Nobles of St. Paul as superintendent. Usually known as the "Nobles Wagon Road," the ambitious project was completed only as far as Fort Lookout on the west bank of the Missouri in what is now South Dakota.<sup>7</sup>

The first steamboats on the upper Minnesota carried

not only goods and supplies but also mail, which was intended to be delivered weekly. Even after the establishment of mail service under regular contracts by stagecoach, the schedule tended to be erratic. The frequency of delivery was more likely to be monthly than weekly, as intended. According to a contract let in 1858, some \$1,900 per annum was to be paid for once-a-week mail service between Shakopee and Fort Ridgely, via Chaska and Glencoe. In 1859 the mail service between Glencoe and the fort was increased to twice weekly. Advertisements of the stageline providing this schedule informed the public that the coach left Glencoe each Monday and Friday morning and returned from the fort on Tuesday and Wednesday.<sup>8</sup>

An interesting record of mail service beyond Fort Ridgely to Fort Abercrombie on the Red River briefly states that D. R. Kennedy of Traverse des Sioux made the trip each week by walking forty miles per day. He carried mail averaging fifteen pounds together with provisions for four days and a small kettle. That this indefatigable walker had acquired something of a local reputation is clear from the assertion that he had several times walked some seventy-five miles from Traverse des Sioux to St. Paul, or vice versa. He also carried mail from St. Paul to Fort Garry (Winnipeg), a distance of 500 to 600 miles, on foot and in the dead of winter.<sup>9</sup>

A CLEAR PICTURE of life at Fort Ridgely is offered by a report made in August, 1857, by Lieutenant Colonel Lorenzo Thomas, assistant adjutant general, to General Scott after an inspection of the post. The Ridgely command had just returned from Fort Randall, on the Missouri River in what is now South Dakota, and was inspected in field dress, "officers without their

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<sup>4</sup>"Fort Ridgely, Minnesota"; June Drenning Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites: A Guide*, 133 (St. Paul, 1972).

<sup>5</sup>Report of the Quartermaster General, November 22, 1853, in 33 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 131 (serial 691).

<sup>6</sup>*Henderson Democrat*, April 3, July 10, 1856.

<sup>7</sup>The various roads connecting the fort with other points are listed in "Fort Ridgely, Minnesota." For a memorial to Congress to appropriate money for a road from Ridgely to South Pass, see *Minnesota Territory, Laws*, 1856, p. 346-348. For Nobles' report of January 18, 1858, on the road, see 35 Congress, 2 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 108, p. 17-29 (serial 1129). See also Willoughby M. Babcock, "Gateway to the Northwest: St. Paul and the Nobles Expedition of 1859," in *Minnesota History*, 35:249-262 (June, 1957); Arthur J. Larsen, "Roads and the Settlements of Minnesota," in *Minnesota History*, 21:225-244 (September, 1940); and Grover Singley, *Tracing Minnesota's Old Government Roads* (St. Paul, 1974).

<sup>8</sup>*Minnesota Statesman* (St. Peter), July 1, 1859; *Glencoe Register*, May 29, 1858, February 26, March 26, 1859.

<sup>9</sup>Thomas Hughes, *Old Traverse des Sioux*, 155 (St. Peter, 1929).

epaulets." The men were not generally well "set up" as soldiers, however, and "were unsteady in their march," but this was readily accounted for "by their arduous service on the Missouri" — building posts and the like. Because of the necessity of getting wood ready for fuel and for the fort sawmill, the men could accomplish little drill before winter.<sup>10</sup>

No hospital had been erected, so one of the older log buildings was used for this purpose, although it was, in Thomas' words, "very inconvenient and entirely inadequate." Another log building was used as a powder magazine, although it was near the commandant's quarters and was "insecure and entirely unsuited for the purpose." The guardhouse was also an old log building in such a bad state of repair that it needed to be torn down and replaced with a new one near the gateway. Thomas found the barracks in "wretched" condition, and "some expense" would be entailed in restoring the building to its original state — "if indeed it can be done." Plaster had been carelessly knocked off the walls in a great many places, and the floors of the kitchens were much damaged, "evidently by cutting wood on them during the winter." The floor of one portion of the quarters was in especially poor condition, being "covered with grease in every direction," and could never be made presentable again.

The arms and ammunition at the fort were set forth in detail in Thomas' report. There were two six-pound brass cannon and two twelve-pound mountain howitzers, all complete and in good order, twelve muskets for bayonet exercises, twelve Colt dragoon pistols, 300 rounds of six-pound fixed ammunition, 128 rounds of twelve-pound mountain howitzer fixed ammunition, more than 11,000 musket ball and buck cartridges, 5,000 expanding-ball rifle cartridges, 3,000 musket buck cartridges, and 789 Colt pistol cartridges. In addition, the companies were well supplied with ammunition. The duties of quartermaster and subsistence departments were being performed by an officer who was "amply supplied with funds, stores, and means of transportation." In a strong box at the post were \$2,583.34 of the quartermaster's funds and \$1,593.75 of the commissary's funds. Hay for the animals was cut on the reserve at a cost of \$4.50 per ton, and 1,000 tons would be required

for the winter. It was, however, often necessary to advertise for bids on hay.<sup>11</sup>

Thomas found the sawmill in good condition and the stables sufficient for the fort's needs. On hand were twenty-four horses, 125 mules, twenty-eight oxen, twenty-seven wagons, an ambulance, two carts, a skiff, 133 sets of wagon harness, thirty-one wagon saddles, and ten riding saddles. In the commissary department were 93,000 rations of salt meat, 69,000 of flour, and 170 head of beef cattle. In addition to the regular troops quartered at the post were various civilians. They included an interpreter, whose salary was "\$16 $\frac{2}{3}$ " per month; an engineer for the sawmill, at \$85; a blacksmith, at \$60; two carpenters, at \$65 each; three teamsters, at \$40 each; two herdsmen, at \$30 each; and one woodchopper for the sawmill, paid \$2.50 per cord of wood he cut.<sup>12</sup>

Of some interest, too, is the fort's procurement of supplies, the record of which is scantily indicated in contemporary newspapers and in advertisements for bids on such produce as hay, grain, wood, and beef.<sup>13</sup> That this activity was not without economic importance on the frontier is indicated by a story in early 1859 in a St. Peter newspaper. It said that great quantities of hay from New Auburn, recently taken to Fort Ridgely, brought as much as \$12.00 per ton although worth only \$2.00 at Glencoe. The same paper told of bidders in Ottawa and Glencoe being awarded contracts for grain and wood — 15,000 bushels of oats at 42 cents per bushel, 16,000 of corn at 74 cents for the first 12,000, 79 cents for the remainder. In addition to this, a contract was let for 12,000 cords of hardwood, no part of which might be elm. The editor asserted that by this system of bid and contract the War Department had saved at least \$20,000, it having been necessary the previous year to pay \$1.16 per bushel for oats, \$1.68 for corn.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of the commercial importance of the necessary supplies on the frontier is available from a statement of the previous year that more than thirty ox teams loaded with grain started for the fort from St. Peter on October 3. More than 100 loads remained in warehouses awaiting shipment. All surplus teamsters of the bustling frontier town are said to have been busy most of the summer in hauling to Fort Ridgely and Fort Abercrombie on the Red River. The steamboat was giving way to other means of transportation.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of an adequate hospital at Ridgely, though noted by Colonel Thomas at his inspection, was not considered serious. More permanent quarters for a hospital were never erected. The fort was considered a remarkably healthful post, and the sick could often be confined merely to their quarters because complaints were usually trifling. That the garrison at the post suffered considerably from the cold, however, during the severe winters of the 1850s and 1860s was later recalled by an officer on duty there at that time. At guard mount during

<sup>10</sup>Thomas to Scott, August 18, 1857, in United States War Department Papers, letters received by the commander in chief of the armies, 1853–1857. The Minnesota Historical Society has a copy.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas to Scott, August 18, 1857; *Henderson Democrat*, May 28, June 4, June 18, 1857.

<sup>12</sup>Thomas to Scott, August 18, 1857.

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance, the *St. Peter Free Press*, August 3, 1859, and September 14, 1859.

<sup>14</sup>*St. Peter Free Press*, February 26, 1859.

<sup>15</sup>*Minnesota Statesman* (St. Peter), October 8, 1858.

the coldest weather, he recalled, it was necessary to keep watch in particular for evidence of frostbite to the men's noses. If signs of this disagreeable affliction were seen, men applied snow to the affected part — a remedy long used and even yet mistakenly believed to be effective. At times the cold was so severe that frostbite occurred before an affected person was aware of it. The winter weather of those years was truly severe. For example, a newspaper of December, 1856, carried the grim news that one John McLeod was surveying a territorial road between Grimshaw's in McLeod County and Fort Ridgely when he discovered a human skeleton about halfway between those points. The victim was thought to have perished during the cold weather of the preceding winter. Only remnants of clothing and a few fragments of oilcloth were found near the remains.<sup>16</sup>

A less gruesome record appeared shortly thereafter in another paper. Reports had been current in St. Paul that Andrew J. Myrick of the trading house at Traverse des Sioux had been frozen to death while on his way to Fort Ridgely. The editor was happy to learn that the report was quite without foundation. "The persons who invent stories of this character without regard to the pain they may cause the friends of the supposed deceased," he wrote, "ought to freeze a thousand times and be entombed in an artice [*sic*] snowdrift with an iceberg for a perpetual monument of their wickedness." A happy appendix to this report was entitled "resurrection" and noted the arrival of Myrick "looking exceedingly well for a person, who only a month since, was frozen to death and eaten up by wolves."<sup>17</sup> (Later Myrick met death in the Sioux Uprising of 1862. Ed.)

A vivid description of the winter storms at Fort Ridgely is contained in the reminiscences of one who was at the post during the winter of 1865-66. It was the custom to post guards at various points, with relief every two hours. Also the officers visited the sutler's store nearly every evening to play cards and chat. On the evening of February 14 two officers and two enlisted men were in the store with two other persons. The day had been mild and pleasant, but about 9:00 P.M. a storm struck quite without warning. The wind became so violent that the new store, probably built to replace the old one destroyed during the 1862 Indian attacks, "shook as though it would go to pieces any moment." The four soldiers started at once for the fort but took nearly half an hour to get as far as the guardhouse. They had to stay there all night only a few feet from their destination. One of the officers offered five dollars to anyone who would lead him to the parade ground, less than a hundred feet away, but no one was willing to take the risk. At daybreak, and then only with difficulty, the group finally managed to reach headquarters.<sup>18</sup>

The guards who had been trapped in the stables, south of the parade ground and even more distant than

the store, had had an even more trying experience. They dared not venture forth at all, were unable to build a fire to ward off the intense cold, and were forced to walk up and down between stalls all night. The commandant had supplied milk for his family by keeping a cow, and on the first morning of the storm one of the men lost his way trying to get to the stable to milk. By the time he finally managed to get back in the afternoon he was completely exhausted.

The sutler's store shook continually during the storm, and fine snow drifted down through the newly shingled roof. A fire was kept burning in the box stove. When it was necessary to venture forth for fuel, the men went with sleeves and overcoat collars securely tied, keeping near the walls of the building until they reached the woodpile at the rear. The snow was so blinding that nothing could be seen through it. While snowbound, the men lived on oysters, crackers, canned peaches, and tea, using the empty tins for cooking utensils. Not until the afternoon of the third day did the storm abate. Then the effects of the blizzard could be seen. Trees sixty feet high in the ravines near the fort were buried, the ravines being so filled with hard snow that teams could be driven in any direction. Despite the rigors of winter, an early editor was able to refer to the fact that the garrison was "full of enjoyment with the pleasures the winter months always bring along."<sup>19</sup>

CHANGES OF personnel at Fort Ridgely were frequent. No less than five entire transformations took place before the Civil War, except for the post sutler and its chaplain, whose "devotion to the spiritual and temporal wants seemed to recommend them to the changing administrations." These two were the Reverend Joshua Sweet, Episcopalian, and Benjamin H. Randall, both of whom were to take part in the defense of the fort in 1862 after the regular troops they had served had departed for service in the South. Prior to 1859 the post was garrisoned with infantry troops, but in that year it was relieved by companies of artillery and Ridgely was designated an artillery school. The Indians, frequent visitors to the fort, now watched the light battery in its maneuvers "with wonder and surprise."<sup>20</sup>

By a general order of May 8, 1859, new regulations were established for Fort Ridgely and other posts, "with

<sup>16</sup> John P. Hawkins, *Memoranda Concerning Some Branches of the Hawkins Family and Connections*, 90-95 (Indianapolis, 1913); *Henderson Democrat*, December 25, 1856, quoting the *St. Anthony Express*.

<sup>17</sup> *St. Paul Advertiser*, January 24, 1857.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Pfefferle, Sr., "Pioneer Day Blizzards in Minnesota," in *Brown County Journal* (New Ulm), January 8, 1921, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Pfefferle, "Pioneer Day Blizzards"; *Glencoe Register*, December 22, 1860 (last quote).

<sup>20</sup> Randall, *Fort Ridgely, Minnesota*.



a view to the better instruction of the artillery in its appropriate duties, and at the same time to secure an efficient disposition of it for actual service." After proper arrangements could be made for the infantry of permanent garrisons, the remainder was to be concentrated in batteries of three to six companies each, one of which should be a light company, for certain interior posts. At each artillery station, whether at a permanent fortification or interior post, a thorough system of instructions, both theoretical and practical, was to be established in the more essential elements of artillery service. At the interior posts, instruction was to be confined to fieldpieces, but in every case it was to be carried to all the duties of the arm in question that the means at hand would permit, "including those of the laboratory."<sup>21</sup>

Designated for the theoretical work were certain manuals of instruction, of which each officer was required to have copies. Until a proficiency should be attained, officers were to devote two days a week to recitation of the texts and one day to laboratory duty. The post commandant was to conduct the recitations (or to designate suitable officers for this purpose) and have charge of the laboratory. When practicable, at least four days a week were to be devoted to the artillery drill. The practical instruction was to be "habitual," each company being under its proper officers and the commandant, but the instruction was not to supersede any usual duty of infantry drill. When the commandant was of a corps other than artillery, the supervision and instruction of the artillery drill was to devolve upon the superior artillery officers, who were still subject to his control. Field officers were to be designated, too, for inspection of the artillery. They were to make a thorough inspection at least once a year, the first to be during the fall of 1859, and were to see that their findings were "minutely" reported to the adjutant general. "In order that the benefits of the system may be disseminated throughout the corps, and the agreeable and disagreeable duty [be] equally distributed," various companies from the permanent and interior posts would be exchanged yearly. Forts Ridgely, Randall, and Leavenworth in the Department of the West were designated as field artillery stations.<sup>22</sup>

An amusing assurance that the artillery school was operating vigorously was contained in a note in a Glencoe paper late in May, 1859. Under the heading, "Those

Cannon, Again," the editor stated that a recent mystery had been solved — "the booming of cannon frequently heard by our citizens was not on occasion of public meetings either of rejoicing or indignation" but the result of the establishment of the school at Fort Ridgely. Although the fort was forty miles distant over the prairie, the roar of the discharge could be heard distinctly at Glencoe when the wind and atmosphere were favorable.<sup>23</sup>

An illuminating picture of the fort at an early date (1855) is drawn in a letter written by Captain Alfred Sully, later to become prominent in the campaigns against the Sioux in Dakota Territory. In his letter Sully alluded to an incident pointing up the fact that military life at the fort was not all serious. The "military people about these diggings," he said, were considerably surprised one day "by the apparition of a dashing, off hand, good looking young lady" who introduced herself as the wife of an absent lieutenant. The soldiers thought this somewhat odd, as the officer in question had never mentioned having a wife. Another officer's wife saw in the woman's possession a cardcase with an engraved name different from that of the absent lieutenant. Sully did not see the lady himself but those who did described her as "good looking and agreeable, but rather fast." Unfortunately there is no way of knowing the outcome of this incident, but there can be little doubt that the lieutenant suffered no little ribbing as the result of the appearance of his "phantom bride."<sup>24</sup>

Sully's letter affords other details of life at Fort Ridgely. It was reported as he wrote his letter that "Uncle Sam" was about to "kick up a muss" with the Sioux on the Missouri, and soon thereafter General William S. Harney did lead a campaign against the Indians in that area. Sully said that, having spent a hard winter at the fort in bad quarters with "nothing to eat," the men had been congratulating themselves at the prospect of having nothing to do during the coming season except cultivate the gardens and prepare for winter. But should the western Sioux report prove true, Sully felt, "we are like to have most of the work." The Indians about Fort Ridgely at the time were disposed to be quiet, Sully wrote, but among them were certain "rascals who[,] feeling themselves somewhat incensed at the unjust manner in which they have been treated by Government agents, are disposed to take hand in whatever game turns up."<sup>25</sup>

One such incident was the murder of a white man, looting of his farm, and burning of his home about 150 miles from the fort. Lacking horses, men at the post had no hope of catching the culprits until they heard that some of them were down the Minnesota at the home of a mixed-blood. Sully was sent off one evening after them. He went down one side of the river while a lieutenant and a second party traveled the opposite side. Wrote Sully: "We had a delightful time of it all night; rain,

<sup>21</sup> Order of Adjutant General Samuel Cooper, May 9, 1859, in 36 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 578-580 (serial 1024).

<sup>22</sup> 36 Congress, 1 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 1, p. 578-580.

<sup>23</sup> *Glencoe Register*, May 28, 1859.

<sup>24</sup> Sully to unidentified correspondent, May 28, 1855, photostatic copy in Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>25</sup> Sully letter, May 28, 1855.

thunder and lightning, nothing to drink, or smoke. . . ." To make matters worse, the group found that the murderers had "cut stick." They did, however, take as prisoner the leader of the band, the noted chief "Mr. Sleepy eyes." According to Sully's humorous account, which is enlightening on the subject of military relations with the Sioux as well as attitudes of the time, Sleepy Eyes later tired of his confinement and "made a break for tall timber." The sentinel in charge "invited him to stop, and not liking the discourteous manner in which he treated his invitation, taught him politeness by planting a ball and three buck shot in his stern sheets." This, however, did not subdue him. Only after three trials of the hardness of a musket as compared with his head did he suffer "himself to be taken back to his quarters," the guardhouse.<sup>26</sup>

Sully claimed that the troops on the American frontier were much worse off than the British under Lord Raglan were before Sebastopol in the Crimean War taking place in 1855. The British troops might complain about the lack of fresh vegetables in their diet and their suffering for want of beer, but American troops such as those at Fort Ridgely never saw a potato or a glass of beer except when they could pay for such out of their own pockets. This was indeed seldom. The loyal West Pointer remarked that "Old Zac and Scott never conquered Mexico with beer barrels and potatoes," and he was surprised that some "smart writer" had not taken up the matter and "pitched into John Bull," since the latter never "handles us with gloves on when he gets a chance." Sully told his correspondent to "give my love to all the girls," though he feared, as had his correspondent, that his separation from female society had "dried me up."<sup>27</sup>

DISCIPLINE has always been an important aspect of military life. That some soldiers at Fort Ridgely did not always take kindly to it is demonstrated by the fact that, in July, 1857, for some reason not now known, a group of thirty-one men deserted from the fort.<sup>28</sup> So many men doubtless were soon returned to duty, but a more serious incident of 1857 is recorded in contemporary newspapers concerning the desertion of two men who had absconded with \$5,000 in gold from the fort. The deputy county sheriff was notified at once and met the Mankato-Shakopee stagecoach at Le Sueur. In the vehicle was Charles E. Flandrau, former Indian agent who was now a judge on the Minnesota Supreme Court, whom the deputy told about the theft. Two men also in the coach appeared very uneasy and, except for their dress, answered the description of the culprits wanted. When they arrived at Le Sueur, Flandrau and others in the stage prepared themselves for any emergency, while the sheriff rode forward to prepare the "reception." At the Valley House, the local hotel, a large crowd had

gathered to witness the arrest. As the coach drew up, one of the culprits suddenly drew a stout clasp knife and, according to the newspapers' melodramatic accounts, "plunged it into his heart." At the same time he handed a carpetbag to Flandrau, saying, "The money is in there." The man is said to have opened the coach door, fallen to the ground, and died on the spot. On his person and in the bag was found the greater part of the missing sum. The man was of foreign birth, about twenty-two years old, and had entered the army as an enlisted man. He had been promoted to the position of clerk of the commissary department at the fort, had always enjoyed the confidence of the post's officers, and seemed well educated. The second man, on whose person was found another part of the whole sum, was taken back to Ridgely and delivered to the commandant.<sup>29</sup>

The main offender of the story just told may have taken his life because he feared the consequences of his act at court martial. The few records available of such trials at Fort Ridgely are picturesque and vivid accounts of strict discipline and of severe punishment for offenses. One deserter, for instance, who had been apprehended after being absent from duty for nearly a year had to forfeit all pay. His punishment also included being "indelibly marked" with the letter "D" (the letter to be one and a half inches high on his left hip), receiving fifty lashes on his bare back "well laid on with a raw hide," and finally being drummed out of the service. Another enlisted man was charged with absenting himself without permission from stable duty, failing to obey an order to groom his horse, running from the stable until overtaken by his sergeant, failing to obey an order to proceed to the guardhouse, running from his guard until overtaken, and kicking a superior and resisting his authority. He was at last forcibly carried to the guardhouse and found guilty. For his sentence he was confined at hard labor in the charge of the guard for a period of eight months, during which he had to attend to the stable duties of his company. He also forfeited \$6.00 of his pay per month for the same period.<sup>30</sup>

Punishment for drunkenness was by no means rare. One example from the winter of 1860-61 will suffice. In the wordiness of military charges, a private was accused

<sup>26</sup>Sully letter, May 28, 1855. The Sleepy Eyes incident is also mentioned in the *St. Peter Courier*, May 31, 1855.

<sup>27</sup>Sully letter, May 28, 1855.

<sup>28</sup>Samuel Cooper to Hannibal Day, Fort Ridgely commandant, August 25, 1855, photostatic copy in Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>29</sup>*Henderson Democrat*, September 17, 1857 (quotes); *Minnesota Free Press* (St. Peter), September 16, 1857; *St. Peter Courier*, September 18, 1857.

<sup>30</sup>United States Army, Department of the West, *General Orders*, no. 2, February 27, 1861; Department of the Northwest, District of Minnesota, *General Orders*, no. 23, May 15, 1863, in Minnesota Historical Society.



FORT RIDGELY is pictured under siege in 1862. The view is from the northwest corner where the artist, Sergeant James G. McGrew, manned one of the howitzers that kept the Sioux from capturing the fort. McGrew painted this picture in 1890, basing it on a sketch he made in 1862.

of "conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline" by introducing into company quarters "a vessel containing spiritous liquors." When ordered to throw out the contents, he used "abusive and threatening language" to his superior by saying, "I will cut your throat," or words to that effect. He also was charged with laying hold of the superior while being taken to the guardhouse and shouting, "I will fix you off, and kill you yet," or words to that effect. His continued violence rendered the superior's efforts to take him thence "ineffectual" until the officer was assisted by a corporal of the guard. The private was found guilty and sentenced to be confined at hard labor for four months, during which time he was to have a twelve-pound ball attached by a chain to his left leg. He also forfeited \$5.00 of his pay per month for the same period.<sup>31</sup>

PERHAPS NO PHASE of life at Fort Ridgely is more interesting than the social events that took place there. On August 9, 1859, for example, occurred the marriage of two persons living at the fort. On that day Lieutenant A. F. Bond, formerly of the quartermaster's corps at the fort, was married to Nella J. Sweet, daughter of the faithful chaplain at the post, the Reverend Joshua Sweet. Soon after, the couple left their comfortable home for a post on a more remote frontier in the West.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most elaborate social affair ever at the fort was the military ball held on Washington's Birthday,

1865. Plans for the ball were laid weeks in advance. The first actual work done was the preparation of suitable space for the ball by tearing out the partitions dividing the second floor of the barracks into rooms. The walls of the resulting large hall were then whitewashed for the occasion. Invitations were sent by a dozen men — mounted, perhaps of necessity, on mules — to New Ulm, St. Peter, and even St. Paul. To furnish music, the men lined up the "Little German Band" of eight pieces at New Ulm and a group of six pieces at St. Peter. Stands were erected at either end of the ballroom for the musicians. Large stoves were set up in which whole hardwood logs could be burned, and along the walls were placed kerosene lamps with reflectors. Colored tissue paper, twisted into rope and strung back and forth across the ceiling, gave a "very pretty effect."<sup>33</sup>

Caterers and bakers were engaged in New Ulm. All day before the ball, the caterers were busy in the kitchens preparing turkeys and geese for roasting in the brick ovens. They also baked rolls and bread and placed dozens of cans of oysters, frozen during the journey from New Ulm, in tubs and pails to thaw out. Pastries of all kinds were transported from New Ulm the day before the ball, one soldier driving and another watching the sweets.

At 7:00 P.M. on February 22 the new ballroom was "a blaze of light," since a lighted candle had been placed in each of the barracks' many windows. The gowns of the officers' wives and "society women" from New Ulm, St. Peter, and St. Paul "formed a colorful background for the dark blue of the officers['] uniforms. Brass buttons and shoulder epaulettes [*sic*] were burnished to a degree of brilliancy delightful to behold. The entertaining strains

<sup>31</sup> Same source as footnote 30.

<sup>32</sup> *St. Peter Free Press*, August 17, 1859.

<sup>33</sup> Mrs. C. C. Ashby, "A Military Ball at Fort Ridgely," in *New Ulm Review*, February 20, 1924, supplement, p. 14.



of music, the laughing eyes, the spirit of utter enjoyment" created a never-forgotten picture for one young girl whose recollection of the ball years later is the source for this account of it. The program of reels, quadrilles, polkas, and waltzes continued until midnight, when everyone approached the gaily decorated tables at which were favors for each guest. The elaborate menu included the roasts, with chicken pies, vegetables of all sorts, oysters, pickles, bread and cakes, jellies, ice cream, candy, nuts, raisins, and coffee. After the banquet the dancing began again and continued until almost daylight. "As the first streak of dawn appeared in the east," long lines of sleighs were drawn up before the barracks, and hot bricks and buffalo robes helped keep out the cold as, in a swirl of snow and icy wind, the guests departed. More than 500 persons had been present, and the cost had been more than \$1,000 — all donated by officers and enlisted men and an amount considered huge at the time to be spent for mere entertainment.<sup>34</sup>

No doubt in part because of the fact that it contains original records of the events of the Sioux Uprising of 1862, the journal of the guard mount for that summer has been preserved. This source furnishes additional interesting sidelights on life at the post at the time. This journal was ordered to be kept in a special box and was to be taken out only when called for by the officer of the day or when required for entering records. "No scribbling or writing, other than the Guard Report," was permitted in the volume, and not a leaf, either blank or written upon, was to be torn out. The record was to be examined carefully each day in the post adjutant's office, and noncommissioned officers were held strictly accountable "on a charge of neglect of duty, mutilating the record of the Post," should it become in any way defaced. The key to the record was in the custody of the sergeant of the guard, who might deliver it only to the sergeant relieving him.<sup>35</sup>

During the summer of 1862 the day-by-day countersigns in the apparently prosaic record reflected the intense interest in the Civil War among those at far-away Fort Ridgely. Names such as Vicksburg, Anderson, Fair Oaks, Seven Pines, Memphis, Winchester, Monitor, Corinth, Shiloh, Port Royal, and Malvern Hill all appeared as countersigns and suggested important events in the fraternal struggle. Occasionally there were names from earlier wars — Cerro Gordo, Palo Alto, Bennington, Princeton, and Trenton, among others. Then on June 28–29 the countersign was Redwood, and on June 29–30 Yellow Medicine. The attention of those at the fort was being brought much closer home as there was Indian tension at both the Lower and Upper Sioux agencies. On August 15–16 the sign was Yellow Medicine again, and on August 19–20, just before the first Sioux attack on the fort, it suddenly was "Shoot all Indians you see coming." After signs like Pope, Crooks,

Vengeance, Watch Close, Little Crow, Little Crow's Village, Prudence, Beware, and Attention, the record broke off. But enough was preserved to demonstrate how attention was abruptly diverted from the war in the South to that at home.<sup>36</sup>

The guard-mount journal also presents a picture of equipment at the guardhouse by including a list of articles turned over day by day from sergeant to sergeant. On the list are padlocks, keys, shovels, axes, stoves, bed-ticks, a ball and chain, a broom, rakes, a desk, a wash basin, forks, a hand cart, a table, bench, and two bunks. Members of the guard were usually posted at the guardhouse and at the stables and, when more men were available, at headquarters. Guards were on duty two hours. Once every two hours the guard patrolled the post, and the officer of the day usually visited the guard four times each day and every hour during the night.

According to the journal few prisoners were in the custody of the guard during the summer of 1862. At one time, three soldiers were held on a charge of drunkenness and one for disobeying orders. Two were released the next day, a third on the second day, and on the third day the guardhouse was empty again. According to one report, two men had been out until midnight, but otherwise the fort was as usual. Another record was entered that a light had been found burning in the commissary at midnight. It had not been lit at the time of the previous round — a suspicious circumstance — but these irregularities foreshadowed none of the serious trouble that was to engage the attention of those at the post with the attack of the Sioux. The usual guard had been but a sergeant and three to six privates, but on the night of August 19–20 there were one sergeant, two corporals, twenty-seven privates, and twenty citizens who were divided into nine posts and three reliefs. A picket guard also was kept out. A notation was made that night that "As the Soldiers are all tired and worn out[,] we are obliged to use Citizens as well as Soldiers for Guard." Only a few hours before he was drowned at Redwood Ferry in an attempt to escape with his detachment from the ambush of the Sioux, Captain John Marsh signed the journal as officer of the day. It was probably his last signature.

All danger to the garrison did not arise from the Indians. A fatal accident that occurred on July 4, 1865, was recalled by one of the survivors. In honor of the occasion, two sections of battery were firing rapidly. According to the account, a cannon could be fired until very hot

<sup>34</sup> Mrs. Ashby, "A Military Ball at Fort Ridgely."

<sup>35</sup> Minnesota Infantry, Fifth Regiment, Company B, "Journal of Guard Mount at Fort Ridgely," May 16–September 14, 1862, in division of archives and manuscripts, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>36</sup> "Journal of Guard Mount at Fort Ridgely."

without danger of igniting the charge if air was kept out. The piece had to be "thumbed" by using a leather pad or cot, held with the thumb over the vent hole at the breech to exclude air. Upon the carefulness of the "thumber" depended the lives of the rammers, because, if the thumb were raised a particle after the gun became heated, the result would be an explosion. In this case, the guns were heated, a six-pound cartridge was placed in a twelve-pound cannon, and the thumbing was improperly done, so the piece exploded. One rammer was killed instantly, the arm of another was torn away, and the flesh on the fingers of men attending the cannon was also torn away. The officer in charge was said to have been intoxicated; his neglect of his duties caused no little bitterness.<sup>37</sup>

FOR THE PURPOSE of reconstructing life at Fort

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<sup>37</sup>T. R. Stewart, "Memoirs," in two volumes in the division of archives and manuscripts in the Minnesota Historical Society. Part of the Stewart work was published in the *Caledonia Journal* from May 1 to October 2, 1929. The episode described here is in volume 2 of the manuscript, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup>Samuel Bloomer, "Diary, 1861-62," in Samuel Bloomer Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

Ridgely there is, perhaps, no better source than the diary of Samuel Bloomer of Stillwater, private in Company B, First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry. On May 28, 1861, his company and Company G were ready to depart from Fort Snelling after being mustered in there. They must have been keenly disappointed when they found they were not to go South right away but were to relieve the regular troops stationed at Fort Ridgely. The "Frank Steele," long in service in supplying the latter post, carried the men upriver on May 28. After waiting for a while "to see what we dare and dare not do," the men arranged their luggage and made themselves as comfortable as the crowded condition of the boat would permit.<sup>38</sup>

Early the next morning they passed Mankato, where a crowd gathered on the levee and cheered them on. The diarist commented that no such admiration for the men's patriotism was shown by the deck hands, who did not hesitate to pilfer their blankets. Although navigation on the narrow, crooked river was difficult, the steamer made such good progress that it reached the fort at 8:00 P.M. on May 29. After considerable delay, the teamsters at the fort brought up the baggage. The volunteers rolled up their blankets and made their beds as best they could on the hard floor of the barracks.

THIS PHOTOGRAPH of the Fort Ridgely area was made in 1936 by G. Hubert Smith.



On May 30 the men were up early to inspect their new quarters. Bloomer was among many who liked what he saw. He recorded his impressions of the old stone barracks with its long piazza, the parade ground, and the buildings that housed the officers and their families. The latter, he noted, were one and a half stories high and painted a straw color in front. Trimmings and gables were white. The parade was divided into four squares by graveled walks. Other walks were on the outer edges. South of the parade were the stables, capable of holding 200 horses. Like many others before him, Bloomer was impressed with the view of the majestic valley of the Minnesota available from the fort.

The new volunteers now cleaned up their quarters in the barracks, and later "escorted" the departing regulars to the steamboat. Several of the latter were "rather the worse for liquor." One of them "took two to support[,] and others had to be taken down in wagons." This day, their last at the fort, the commanding officer had given them "liscence" [*sic*].

From the volunteers' first day at the fort, "there was considerable grumbling in camp about rations." Bloomer thought, probably with good reason, that the men did not have enough to eat. Nor could all the men eat at once in the small room allotted for meals. Those who arrived last were likely to get nothing better than crackers and water. As a result, the doors were now kept locked until mealtime, and when they were opened there was a great crowding and scrambling to get inside. The diarist said the scene reminded him of "hogs going to their swill trough." Before long, Bloomer was happy to learn, the men would have three menses and also the "privilege" of buying their own knives, spoons, and forks.

There is other evidence besides Bloomer's diary to indicate that food at the fort was sometimes lacking in quality as well as quantity. Later volunteers had their fun over the beef served, which they regarded as "deficient in adipose." They organized a mock burial party, using the police cart for a hearse, and marched with reversed arms to the center of the parade behind a fife and drum playing a "dead march." The solemn military funeral for the meat rations offended no one but the beef contractor, although the commandant quickly disbanded the party.<sup>39</sup>

On Bloomer's first Sunday at the fort he and others did not neglect divine service. It was held in front of headquarters "with a stand on the stoop for a pulpit." Chaplain Sweet read the Episcopal service and delivered a short sermon, while a hastily organized choir sang. Bloomer thought the choir did very well considering the short time the members had to practice. On that Sunday afternoon the first dress parade was held, and the diarist was much amused at the difficulties of the amateur drummer who took part.<sup>40</sup>

On Monday afternoon, June 3, came drill. In order to

be certain that it was correctly performed, the inexperienced captain of Company B read the movements from his book of tactics. Bloomer felt this procedure was a grave mistake, because the drill was much slower than it would have been if the officer had studied movements in his quarters and later demonstrated them. There was much confusion over the proper routine of the drill. The next day the regimental major tried his own hand at drill and did, said Bloomer, "quite well for a green hand." After drill came dress parade and then drill again, during which movements at the "double quick" were attempted. This served to place the men in utter confusion because of the officers' excitement. When their commander was cool, the men usually did well, the diarist said.

One night a sergeant of the guard was making his rounds in the darkness. When he received no response to a challenge, he charged with his bayonet, only to strike a harmless post. The incident presumably furnished much amusement for his subordinates. On June 6 the men were delighted to see the "Jeanette Roberts," a familiar sight on the upper river, bearing supplies for the fort. These volunteers of 1861 were young — the average age at enlistment of Bloomer's company was twenty-four, that of the second company at the post was twenty-two — and inevitably full of boyish pranks. On June 7, 1861, for example, Bloomer recorded that it was some time after "tattoo" before the men could get to sleep, "owing to the usual concert." This consisted of imitations of cats and dogs fighting, cocks crowing, hens cackling, bulls bellowing, cows lowing, calves bleating, wolves howling, "and a variety of other noises" which, when put together "made quite an entertaining concert." Recreation on another occasion consisted of sparring with boxing gloves that one of the men had thoughtfully brought with him. Even the captain entered into this sport.

Another day there was "considerable fever" among the soldiers about having their hair cut short. A sergeant who took a chance sitting for a man who passed himself off for a barber had his locks cut so short that he was forced to wear a handkerchief over his head to protect it from the sun. "Poor fellow," wrote Bloomer. "He looked as though he had lost all his friends in this world."

On June 12 Bloomer and others of his company were greatly disappointed to learn that they would not be among the troops attending the Indian annuity payments scheduled to take place at the end of the month at the agencies. They had hoped for such an opportunity "to show their importance" at the payment. On June 14, after dress parade, the captain, who was "pretty well 'set

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<sup>39</sup>*Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861–1865*, 1:200 (St. Paul, 1890).

<sup>40</sup>Bloomer, "Diary, 1861–62." The rest of the article is based on this source.



*THE AUTHOR of this article headed archaeological excavations at Fort Ridgely for the Minnesota Historical Society in 1936 and 1937, assisted by the Civilian Conservation Corps. Several building foundations were uncovered which later were stabilized and can now be viewed by visitors. In the distance are two buildings which still remain: a powder magazine and the stone commissary.*

up' with liquor," attempted to "show off" the company - but scarcely to their advantage. He presented himself with such words as "Fellow soldiers," "It's me," "I'm here," and so on and then offered "Three cheers for Major Dike" — Major William H. Dike, the commanding officer. This was followed with "Now then three cheers for Hell." To Bloomer's disgust, some gave the cheers. When complimented by their officer on the quality of their drill, the men replied that they would have done better had they not been so dry. The captain took the hint and promptly led them off to the sutler's where he provided all the beer they could consume. Certain members of the company, including Bloomer, did not approve of this turn of events and, instead, went to the chaplain's quarters to hold choir practice for the service of the following Sunday.

THAT DAY, June 16, was a momentous one for members of the Fort Ridgely garrison. While they were at church a messenger arrived from Fort Snelling with the

welcome orders that they were to depart right away for Washington, D.C. At once a great shout went up. The men had obviously tired quickly of Fort Ridgely, and Bloomer confided in his diary that "the sooner we are relieved the better we will like it." The next day all was bustle as the men prepared for marching orders. Old regulation coats, regular knapsacks, haversacks, canteens, and overcoats were issued. To the delight of everyone, the old canteens and haversacks were condemned — the former, made of japaned tin, caused the water in them to boil when exposed to the sun.

Amidst the great excitement on the morning of June 19, 1861, the men eagerly watched from the barracks porch for a first glimpse of the steamboat "City Belle," which arrived about 9 o'clock. Rations for thirty days were stowed in the wagons along with baggage to be taken to the landing. Shouldering their knapsacks for the first time, these loyal volunteers marched to the levee and boarded the steamer, where they were served a good meal in the cabin. When the vessel cast off about

4:00 P.M., the men were on their way at last "to Dixie," leaving twenty-five forlorn men behind with their captain, Lewis McKune. Some of those remaining "fairly cried with disappointment," but, concluded Bloomer, "We cannot always do as we like in the army." Captain McKune went South in his turn and only a little more than a month later died on the field at Bull Run (Manassas). Among members of his company who also died were perhaps some of those who were so bitterly disappointed at Fort Ridgely a short time before.

By a strange coincidence, another casualty on the

same Bull Run battlefield was Confederate Brigadier General Barnard E. Bee, a former captain of the United States army who had served at Fort Ridgely. Four years earlier he had led a difficult and discouraging march from the fort across the wintry Minnesota prairie in search of the perpetrators of the so-called Spirit Lake massacre — the renegade Sioux, Inkpaduta, and his band.

THE PHOTOGRAPHS on pages 127 and 128 are by Kenneth Carley. All other pictures used with this article are in the Minnesota Historical Society's audio-visual library.

*THE RECONSTRUCTED commissary now houses an interpretive center that was completed in 1975 by the Minnesota Historical Society. In foreground are foundations of the stone barracks.*



### INDEX AVAILABLE

THE INDEX for volume 44 of *Minnesota History*, covering the eight issues published in 1974 and 1975, is now ready. Subscribers do not automatically receive the index; it must be ordered.

The price for this and earlier indexes is \$3.00. (Add 5 cents for postage and handling if ordering by mail.

Minnesotans must also add a 4 per cent sales tax.) Indexes can be purchased for the following volumes of *Minnesota History*: 8, 16, 17, 23, 24; 28-31, 34-44.

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SEVERAL regular features were not published in this Sioux Up-rising issue. They will be resumed in the Winter issue.



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