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THE ARMY AND THE WESTWARD MOVEMENT¹

Perhaps no word in American history stirs the imagination more profoundly than that oft-used word "frontier." It calls forth a series of pictures. We see the restless pioneers of the tidewater region pushing up the valleys into the foothills of the Alleghenies. We see Daniel Boone leading a small band across those mountains into the fertile Blue Grass region. We see a snail-like caravan of wagons moving along the crooked, muddy, and stump-filled roads of Indiana. We see a long line of covered wagons, accompanied by mounted guides, wending its way across a western prairie. These pictures have become a part of our national heritage.

The westward-moving bands of frontiersmen were led by intrepid hunters and fighters. Carrying their scanty possessions, they took their families into the vast spaces of mid-America. This migration has naturally stirred the imagination of historians, who have collected a mass of detail concerning the dangers, the hardships, and the glories of the frontiersman. In fact, the frontiersman has become a national symbol of restless energy and resourcefulness. Without detracting from the merits of this heroic figure, I wish to speak of another kind of frontiersman—one who labored just as steadily, just as unselfishly, and just as he-

¹ A paper read on July 14, 1934, at the Fort Snelling session of the twelfth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

roically as the typical hunter, trapper, and farmer. I refer to the American soldier.

The westward movement has most frequently been pictured as the achievement of individuals, as the unofficial, undirected, and unsupervised activity of ambitious and restless men. Indeed, this viewpoint has been so stressed as to obscure the plain fact that the United States government guided, directed, and protected the movement. Without the activities of the government, the westward movement would have been an isolated and unregulated scattering of people. These official activities deserve attention.

In aiding the westward movement the government secured land cessions from the Indians, surveyed and plotted the land, and sold it at reasonable prices and on liberal terms. The government cleared trails and built roads to facilitate the movement. It provided for prompt territorial government and for eventual statehood. The settlers were thus insured against legal chaos and were placed on the road that led to political equality with the older states. The national government provided for mail service as rapidly as frontier conditions allowed, thus maintaining those bonds which eventually made us into a nation. The extent of these services shows that the westward movement was an official, coöperative enterprise, one sponsored and guided by the United States government. The value of these services is beyond calculation. Yet if these had been all, even they would have been insufficient. The settlers needed still another service, that of protection against restless Indians and jealous foreign powers. Through the American army the United States also provided for that need.

Before describing the services that the army rendered to the westward movement, it might be well to point out how the westward movement affected the army. It is probably correct to say that if there had been no western frontier to protect, there would have been no standing army. In 1783, at the time of the signing of the treaty that ended the

Revolution, the army consisted of eighty men who were designated as guards. Between 1783 and 1789 the army numbered about seven hundred. From 1789 to 1812 small forces of a few thousand were maintained, but the prejudice against a standing army was intense and persistent. At the close of the War of 1812 the army was allowed to continue its existence because of the necessity of guarding the expanding frontier. The services of the army on the frontier soon proved the wisdom of those who advocated its continuance, and proposals for its abolition became fewer and fewer. Thus the army was on trial. How did it prove its utility?

The services of the army were varied and numerous. It surveyed rivers and lakes; it improved harbors and built fortifications; it surveyed routes and built roads and bridges; it protected mail routes, government stores, roads, and ferries; it ejected squatters and established legal claimants; it protected agents and commissioners; it restrained and regulated hunters and trappers; it assisted officers of the law; it protected whites against Indians and Indians against whites; and finally it fought those occasional battles which seemed to be inevitable. Paradoxical as it may sound, the success of the army was proved by the infrequency with which it had to fight.

These varied and numerous activities were carried on under peculiarly difficult circumstances. The guarding of a rapidly shifting and changing frontier was a Herculean task. If the settlers had moved westward in even lines the task would have been simplified. But they shot forward in projecting tongues of settlement, leaving unoccupied areas in the rear. The new settlements grew and spread backward and forward, encircling Indian tribes and thus leaving islands of Indians within a sea of whites. The pioneers moved up river valleys; they occupied mining and fishing regions. They advanced now steadily, now in overwhelming waves. Thus the frontier was never a regular line that

moved westward at a regular pace. In fact, the frontier line at a given time resembled a jagged bolt of lightning or a splotched page from a pupil's copybook more than it resembled a straight line. In truth, there never was a frontier; there were always *frontiers*. There were at least four distinguishable frontiers.

The first frontier, that nearest the older, settled regions, was the beginning of the area which contained fewer than two persons to the square mile. This line was determined by the fertility and accessibility of the land. The second frontier was marked by the line between the ceded and unceded lands. In other words it was the limit of lands which the government had acquired from the Indians. The third frontier, often in advance of the cession line, can best be described as the military frontier. It was characterized by a line of posts which maintained small garrisons. These posts were frequently entirely within Indian lands, although the government usually secured formal cession of the post site. The fourth frontier was the international boundary. The Florida boundary, the Mississippi, the Sabine, the Rocky Mountains, and the forty-ninth parallel are examples of this fourth frontier which required the attention of the army. Each of these frontiers might require protection, and they might overlap or be separated by hundreds of miles.

This condensed and simplified statement about the frontier is not to be taken too literally nor applied too rigidly, but it gives an idea of the complicated nature of frontier defense, of how difficult it was to protect scattered settlers against roving tribes. Thickly settled areas might be bordered by restless and hostile Indians, thus requiring the presence of troops. Thinly settled regions might be bordered by peaceable tribes against which no troops were needed. So neither the line of settlement nor the density of population afforded a criterion for the location of a garrison. Whatever the situation might be in a given year,

it was likely to be radically different within a very short time.

In spite of the baffling nature of the problem, the war department had to undertake the task of insuring peace and security on the frontier. The efforts to do so led to the construction of one line of posts after another. As each line facilitated the influx of settlers, it was itself rendered useless by their arrival. The army officers then had to draw up another plan and build another chain of posts. In fact, so many posts were built that no historian or official in the war department can give the exact number. It is even difficult to ascertain how many were in existence in a given year. Posts were erected, occupied, abandoned, re-occupied, and abandoned again. It is easy, however, to ascertain the principal posts and to see the plan of defense within a given period. A glance at the military frontier in the decade following the War of 1812 will illustrate this point.

In 1815 the country was dotted with tribes which had aided the British or had at least opposed the United States. The Florida frontier was beset by marauding bands. The northern frontier was still under the spell of British hostility and interference. The western frontier was likewise restless and unpacified. Thousands of eager settlers, temporarily restrained by the war, were pushing into the Old Northwest and across the Mississippi. The United States was seeking to regain its control of the Indians and of the fur trade and to promote the westward movement. The plans involved a shifting of the military frontier.

In 1815 the chain of posts extended from Detroit southwest through Fort Wayne, Terre Haute, St. Louis, and on toward the gulf. A new chain of posts farther west was needed. The army was equal to the occasion. The new line, starting at the Sault de Ste. Marie, extended toward the southwest through Green Bay and Prairie du Chien and southward through Rock Island, Fort Edwards, and on

into what is now western Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. Posts were established in one year, 1816, at Green Bay, Prairie du Chien, Rock Island, and Chicago, and, within a decade after the close of the war, at a dozen other places. As the new line of posts was built, the older posts were abandoned. For example, Fort Wayne and the posts at Terre Haute, Peoria, and Belle Fontaine became unnecessary.

Thus a chain of posts was established in advance of widespread settlement. The army was indeed the vanguard of the westward movement. Temporarily isolated, these posts nevertheless stood as proof of the willingness of the government and of the power of the army to afford protection for the settler. They even served as challenges to him to advance further and choose almost at will from the vast acres available.

The line of posts which has been described does not indicate the full extent of the government's plans. In 1819 the United States undertook to extend the military frontier far up the Mississippi and the Missouri. This plan was designed eventually to enlarge the settled area, to extend the fur trade, and to counteract British influence among the Indians. In accordance with this plan Fort Atkinson was erected on the Missouri just above Omaha, and Fort Snelling was built at the mouth of the Minnesota. These posts illustrate the connection between the army on the one hand and trade, diplomacy, and Indian policy on the other. They also stood as one of those challenges which the frontiersmen were not slow to meet. Fort Atkinson has developed into the state of Nebraska, and Fort Snelling was the seed out of which has grown the flower of Minnesota.

It would be an incomplete and misleading picture if we presented these frontier posts as purely military centers. They were pioneers in industry and culture as well as in priority of occupation. Many frontier posts can very properly be designated as agricultural experiment stations. The

policy of economy temporarily led to such extensive farming and stock raising as to arouse the scorn of more than one army inspector. Residents of the posts were liberal subscribers to magazines and newspapers, and the post libraries compared not unfavorably with those of many towns of the same period. Most of the posts maintained bands, and theatrical productions were frequently given. Schools were established early and maintained persistently. Visitors and lecturers were hospitably entertained. Instead of being isolated centers of warlike activities, the frontier posts were an epitome of the entire civilization that was to follow. The army not only protected American civilization; it was itself a part of that civilization.

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