

## SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

### THE ARCHIVES OF MILITARY POSTS

THE GENERAL importance of military forts in the development of the Northwest is more or less familiar to the student, and formal histories of such posts as Crawford, Snelling, Abercrombie, and Sisseton gather data from many sources for easy consultation.<sup>1</sup> Much more is available, however, in the original records of these posts, now in the National Archives in Washington. There rich rewards await the person who wishes to go beyond general facts, to enter into the life and spirit of these outposts of American civilization. In the manuscript division of the Minnesota Historical Society are filmstrips of the archives of Fort Ridgely, and some for Fort Snelling. When these official sources are correlated with other sources of official and unofficial character — diaries, letters, newspapers, and other printed sources — a rather intimate knowledge of these frontier posts and their history is possible, on the basis of extensive documentation.

Professor Edgar B. Wesley has remarked that instead of an isolated center of warlike activities, the frontier military post was “an epitome of the entire civilization that was to follow.”<sup>2</sup> Not only did these posts function to protect and foster American civilization; they were themselves a part of that civilization. The student of the archives of these posts expects them to tell the story of campaigns and battles, but he will also find that they tell much of frontier life in a some-

<sup>1</sup> See Bruce E. Mahan, *Old Fort Crawford and the Frontier* (Iowa City, 1926); Marcus L. Hansen, *Old Fort Snelling, 1819-1858* (Iowa City, 1918); *Fort Abercrombie, 1857-1877* (*North Dakota Historical Collections*, vol. 2, pt. 2 — Bismarck, 1908); and Edward A. Hummel, “The Story of Fort Sisseton,” in *South Dakota Historical Review*, 2: 126-144 (April, 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Wesley, “The Army and the Westward Movement,” *ante*, 15: 381.

what special setting. The soldiers' life in the western posts was not unlike that of other pioneers, who looked toward their military neighbors with pride and confidence.

Something of the nature of the archives of frontier posts in the Middle West will be conveyed by a brief account of some of the materials extant for Fort Ridgely on the upper Minnesota River. This fort was established in the spring of 1853 and it was occupied by the regular army until 1867, with the exception of the Civil War years, when it was garrisoned by companies of Minnesota volunteers. During this occupation the outbreak of the Minnesota Sioux occurred, and the stirring events of 1862 have underlined the importance of the fort in the history of the state. The events of the Sioux War, of the siege and relief of Fort Ridgely, more familiar than those of earlier and later date, have, however, overshadowed equally significant but less spectacular events. It is now possible to study the broader significance of the post on the frontier in times of peace as well as of war.

The official archives of Fort Ridgely comprise important series of records kept at the post, with only brief gaps, for the period during which it was occupied by the regular army. Faithful public servants have left a record of peace-time affairs which is not matched, in fact, by the record of times of war. Only the "Journal of Guard Mount" for the summer of 1862, now in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society, survives for the Civil War period when volunteers held the post. In the National Archives, however, are preserved long series of documents relating to the regular army at Fort Ridgely, all of major importance for historical purposes. The extant post documents are available in microfilm at the Minnesota Historical Society, with the exception of certain volumes of the "Guard Report Books," containing the record of trials by court-martial. Permission to copy these documents has been withheld. Something of their character is to be learned from similar proceedings available

elsewhere, as in the printed orders of the Department of the West.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the most informative documents for Fort Ridgely are the volumes of letters sent from this post, which extend from 1854 to 1860 and contain the record of the contact maintained between the post and the outside world. These volumes contain routine correspondence on post inspections, reports, post affairs, and the like, and their contents shed light on such matters as the physical condition and equipment of the post and its construction and maintenance. In the same series, also, are invaluable data on matters allied to military affairs, particularly on Indian affairs. With this series are to be correlated the miscellaneous letters received and the documents of superior offices, such as those of the Headquarters of the Army. The archives of the latter office were calendared some years ago by the Minnesota Historical Society, which also possesses copies of some of the original documents.

For the purpose of reconstructing life at Fort Ridgely, three types of records are especially useful. Though incomplete, they cover the periods from 1853 to 1859 and from 1866 to 1867, when the regular army occupied the fort. These series include "Order Books," "Consolidated Morning Report Books," and, most useful of all, "Proceedings of the Post Council of Administration." There are recorded in great detail the everyday affairs of the post. Included are data on expenditures from company funds for many purposes, such as for seed for company gardens, for books and periodicals for company libraries, the decisions made by the council at regular intervals setting fair prices for goods to be sold by the sutler, and the like. There one begins to see beneath the surface and to get fleeting glimpses of the

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Head Quarters Department of the West, *General Orders*, no. 2 (St. Louis, 1861). This order, which relates to court martial proceedings at Fort Ridgely, is one of a series of similar leaflets, now very rare, in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society.

life of the frontier soldier, a subject hitherto somewhat obscured in historical accounts by a greater interest in events of strictly military importance.

Those who would imagine that the lot of the frontier soldier was an easy one need only refer to these archives for proof to the contrary. A post order of July 2, 1856, for example, furnishes data for interesting comparisons with army life today. The order directed that reveille was to be sounded no later than 4:30 A.M. It was to be followed by other bugle calls—surgeon's call at 6:15 A.M., breakfast call at 6:30 A.M., morning fatigue call at 7:00 A.M., guard mounting at 8:00 A.M., orderly call at 11:00 A.M., and recall from fatigue and dinner call at 12 M. Fatigue call was again sounded at 2:00 P.M., recall not before 7:00 P.M., retreat at sunset, tattoo at 9:30 P.M., and, lest the soldier lose his needed sleep, the signal to extinguish lights was sounded at 9:45 P.M. Such a schedule was doubtless changed with the seasons. In an order of August 30, 1856, reveille was set for 5:00 A.M., tattoo at 8:45 P.M., and the signal to extinguish lights at 9:00 P.M.

That fatigue periods were just as important as those of military training is clear from an order of September 30, 1856, which also indicates the close dependence of the post upon its own resources in such matters as the provision of fuel. It specified that the wood detail for the ensuing winter should consist of one commissioned officer, one sergeant, one corporal, and thirty privates, each officer, like the men, serving in his turn. The party was to be detailed for a week at a time to leave the post each morning at fatigue call and to return each evening with sunset. An officer was to accompany each detail and was held responsible for marching the party to and from the garrison "in proper order and without unnecessary detention." Care was to be taken to select trees that could be easily hauled to the post and were also least useful for lumber. Oak was to be preferred to other

varieties, and whenever available, dry and seasoned wood was to be taken. The wood was to be cut in convenient lengths, and was to be piled where it could be easily reached with carts, and the amounts cut were to be reported. "The quantity of fuel necessary," remarked the commandant, "is very large and to provide it in sufficient quantities will require the labor of the whole garrison for some time to come." It is not remarkable that army inspectors frequently complained that the frontier soldier's military training was neglected.

The full story of Fort Ridgely and of its significance on the Minnesota frontier is yet to be told, just as are the individual histories of many other western posts. The archives of these posts, however, reveal much about the nature of existence on the military frontier, and historians are grateful that they are available in such fullness.

G. HUBERT SMITH

MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA



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