“Smartest HORSE in the U.S. Army”

Whiskey of Fort Snelling

MARILYN L. SLOVAK
In 1921, a horse that would earn a place in Minnesota history arrived at Fort Snelling from Fort Reno, Oklahoma. Chestnut in color, with a white star on his forehead and a white sock on his left rear leg, the ten-year-old from the Montana plains was no more than 15.2 hands tall. Aside from disproportionately long hind legs that caused him to walk with a slight stagger, his looks were quite ordinary.1

The future initially appeared bleak for this wild horse that reputedly “didn’t even wear shoes” and “could kick a hole in a battle-ship.” Considered unsuitable for the army because of his rebellious spirit, he might have been destroyed were it not for another 1921 arrival at the fort, Lt. William Reuben Hazelrigg. Seeing the possibility of greatness beneath the horse’s unruly exterior, the experienced equestrian selected the chestnut as his assigned mount and, perhaps because of the sway in his walk, named him Whiskey.2

At this time, horses were still very much a part of the U.S. Army. Remount stations around the country supplied military posts with horses to replace those lost to war and old age. Many stations had breeding programs; others collected wild horses, which were sent on for evaluation and training. In the years after World War I, the army promoted equine sports such as polo and fox hunting, as well as horse-show competition, to keep troops and animals in top form. It would be the early 1940s before motorization and officers who had grown up with it—and the necessities of another world war—completely eliminated live horsepower from the army. Until that time, most officers considered horses an indispensable part of the military.3

Nowhere was this more evident than at Fort Snelling, home to the Third U.S. Army Infantry Regiment. Though not required to be mounted, officers were assigned army horses. Most owned personal mounts, as well.4 These animals, along with the horses and mules that pulled the artillery and escort wagons, filled the fort’s barns.

The shared love of horses and equestrian sports led to the development of a close-knit relationship between fort personnel and Twin Citians. Some civilians participated in equestrian activities at the fort, while others came out in droves to watch. Officers and their families, in turn, supported and participated in civilian-sponsored events at the Minnesota State Fair, local horse shows, and fox hunts.

In 1922, post commandant Col. A. W. Bjornstad authorized two horse shows a year on site. That same year, Fort Snelling officers hosted the first of many international polo tournaments. Fox hunting flourished, with civilian-owned hound packs providing a weekly hunt until 1928 when fort officers acquired their own hounds and established the Fort Snelling Hunt.5

Hazelrigg assumed responsibility for Whiskey’s training and, along with the usual methods, spent time quietly talking to the horse.6 No one is sure what he said, but he earned the horse’s trust. The two became inseparable.

The lieutenant soon discovered that Whiskey had a variety of talents. Excelling at polo, he showed an “instinct for the game” that soon had sportswriters claiming that he “qualified as one of the best polo players on the field.” Whiskey quickly mastered tricks such as lifting the lieutenant’s cap from his head by its visor and replacing it, removing a handkerchief from a pocket, searching for a hidden treat, sitting on his haunches, lying down and playing dead, and bowing. According to Dana F. Christian, a warrant officer and, later, historian and president of the Third Infantry Regiment Association, “Any tricks a horse is capable of doing, it seems Whiskey could do. Hazelrigg would throw a bunch of handkerchiefs on the ground, and Whiskey could pick out a special colored one.”7

Whiskey’s greatest talent was jumping. Combining spectacular jumps with a repertoire of tricks, the horse and his rider did double duty at fort polo games, also supplying the half-time entertainment. No obstacle deterred the fearless, high-flying horse, be it a team of mules hitched to a supply wagon; the white mule, Snelling, standing between two fences; a group of diners seated at a table; a human hurdle; or a blazing jump. When the crowds in the stands clapped and shouted their approval, the Minneapolis Star reported, “it seemed Whiskey knew they were cheering at him.”8

Marilyn Slovak, a retired teacher and human relations professional, has been active in the local horse community for more than 40 years.
Whiskey was also a natural in the show ring, garnering his first ribbons at the 1922 Gopher Gunner Horse Show, a two-day event jointly hosted by civilians and officers at the Kenwood Armory in Minneapolis. He followed up with wins at Fort Snelling’s Spring Horse Show, demonstrating the success of Hazelrigg’s training by taking Mary Anderson, a civilian teenager, flawlessly around the course for ladies’ hunters. Because military duties or other commitments occasionally kept officers from exercising their horses, help from civilian saddle-club friends was welcomed and encouraged at the fort.11

At the Minnesota State Fair that year, the lieutenant took Whiskey over the jumps in a hunt class without the benefit of reins or stirrups. The round was a crowd-pleaser, but the judge, bound by horse show rules, placed Whiskey fifth. Then the little range horse, considered untrainable just one year before, received the blue ribbon and coveted silver cup in the E. N. Saunders competition for the best polo mount. During his long show career, Whiskey did not always win. As the Minneapolis Journal

Victors and spoils: Whiskey, Lieutenant Hazelrigg (patting his horse), and other members of the winning Fort Snelling Blacks polo team, 1923.
“He knows that he has only a few more weeks left with Bill,” horsemen in the stables explained. . . .

Entered in the jumps, and ridden in one event by Miss Mary Anderson, Whiskey seemed nervous and upset, as he approached the obstacles. At every hurdle, he crouched low, and almost stopped before he unleased his plunge. But in spite of the fact that he failed to place in the women hunters’ event, the crowd cheered.

“I never saw Whisky act like that before,” N. S. Davis, manager of the show said, as he watched the horse hesitate at every jump.

Whiskey’s confidence was not restored until the lieutenant was in the saddle. Then, in “the most exciting of all events, the hunters’ ‘touch and go,’” where horses take a four-foot jump and are disqualified if they touch a rail, Whiskey placed second. The crowd heard Hazelrigg urging, “Up, good boy,” at each jump.

The lieutenant and Whiskey had one final treat for their fans: a week of performances on the vaudeville stage at the Pantages Theater in Minneapolis. Box seats were reserved for members of Twin Cities riding clubs, a testament to Hazelrigg’s prominence in the local riding community.

Before his April 1926 departure, Hazelrigg raised funds to buy his beloved horse. He sent a request to the War Department through his congressman, asking permission to purchase Whiskey or take him to the Philippines as his mount. Some local civilians tried to help by writing to Gen. A. W. Bjornstad, former Fort Snelling commandant and riding partner of Hazelrigg, in hopes that the senior officer might bring some influence to bear.

Unmoved by these efforts, the secretary of war denied the request. While the army paid transportation costs...
for up to six horses assigned to cavalry officers, infantry officers were not allowed to take their army mounts to a new post.20

And so Whiskey, noticeably depressed, remained at Fort Snelling after Hazelrigg’s departure. It took the wife of an army captain, Mrs. Walter P. O’Brien, who arrived at the post in the summer of 1927, to bring Whiskey out of the doldrums. Their partnership, however, got off to a shaky start. The first two nights of the state fair show, “the ‘one man’ horse became stubborn,” for the most part refusing to jump, a local newspaper reported. By the third evening, Whiskey, though “balky and nervous,” showed “brief flashes of form” with several “magnificent effortless leaps.”21

In their last class, one jump consisted of a mannequin dressed in a red coat lying on a picnic table. Other obstacles, like brush jumps, mimicked circumstances that might be found in the hunt field. Perhaps the tricky jumps and the mannequin brought back memories of earlier, happier days, because Whiskey finally clicked with Mrs. O’Brien, earning first place.

AS HAZELRIGG’S SCHEDULED RETURN to the states in March 1928 drew near, one local newspaper learned that he and Whiskey “were to be reunited” and that “Fort Snelling will lose Whiskey.”

An agreement was made before the lieutenant went to the Philippines that he might buy the horse on his return and friends at Fort Snelling said Tuesday night that he probably will. He will have to pay only about $160. Army regulations provide that horses shall be sold [to] officers on occasions at the prevailing average price of horses. Whiskey now is worth much more, officers say, but because Lieutenant Hazelrigg’s work and training made him valuable, the sale will be made.22

At the suggestion of his commanding officer in the Philippines, Hazelrigg had waited until he returned to the states to submit his application to purchase Whiskey. Hoping to enhance his chances, he sold the horse he had bought for personal use in the Philippines to the U.S. government. While the lieutenant was out of the country, however, War Department rules concerning the purchase of army horses had changed. The amended rules stated: “No horse that has been in the army organization for six months that has been developed and is particularly valuable for that organization may be sold to any individual.”23

WHISKEY SOLDIERED ON. For most of 1928, during Mrs. O’Brien’s pregnancy, Lt. Walter R. Miller rode him. In June 1929, just hours before a fort horse show, Miller was wounded in a duel over the affections of a St. Paul girl. Mrs. O’Brien was a last-minute substitute. As if no time had passed since their last ride together, Whiskey made jumping look easy with ribbon-winning performances. The Minneapolis Star enthused: “Whiskey, who had more fun than anybody there! Whiskey jumps as if he really enjoys it . . . The gladness of Whiskey lights up a horse show.” But soon, history repeated itself and O’Brien was reassigned to Hawaii. Captain Raymond T. Seymour became Whiskey’s principal rider.25
That September, Hazelrigg, now a captain, passed through the Twin Cities. Aware that his old horse was competing at the state fair, he went directly to the Hippodrome. Arriving just before Whiskey’s class began, the captain walked out to the judges’ stand in the middle of the arena. The Minneapolis Tribune reported that he was shaking hands with friends when the ringmaster announced that Whiskey was next on the course. “Captain Hazelrigg stiffened. The greeting of friends was forgotten. . . . There were tears in the captain’s eyes as he followed the horse around the ring.”

At the awards ceremony, Whiskey was led into the arena with the other winners.

“See your old friend out there; wonder if he remembers you,” Captain Hazelrigg was reminded.

“Sure,” he snapped and gave a low whistle. Whiskey’s head went up and he cocked his ears and looked around and then spied his old friend and trainer. A lung[ e] and the lead strap was jerked out of a groom’s hand and he trotted over to the gate in the judges’ stand.”

Coming directly to his first trainer, Whiskey bent his head down for a pat and nodded when the captain whispered in his ear.

“Remember me, old fellow?” asked Hazelrigg as he stroked the great old campaigner’s neck, and Whiskey replied by reaching out, grasping the visor of the captain’s cap between his lips, lifting it and setting it back on his head—one of the first tricks he was taught.

It was too much for Hazelrigg. Tears welled in his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. Another pat and he whispered to his old friend, “Better go back, son, and get your ribbon.” And Whiskey trotted off. Hazelrigg turned on his heel and strode from the ring.

**Over the next few years**, Whiskey continued his career as a polo pony and performer. He also competed successfully in horse shows, ridden by Captain Seymour as well as Barbara Townsend and Margaret Boyers, the teenage daughters of army captains. In September 1931, Mrs. Orin D. Haugen, newly arrived at the fort with her lieutenant husband, became Whiskey’s rider. She adored the mascot, now 20 years old. Whiskey, returning the affection, performed beautifully with her at the St. Paul Civic Auditorium Show in January 1932. At the Fort Snelling Society Circus in February, they reprised some trademark stunts, including jumping over a dinner table and diners. After a summer of exhibitions and several blue ribbons, their act was featured nightly at the state fair.

Whiskey’s last season as a regular entertainer and show horse was 1933. When he won the open jumping class at the Fort Snelling Horse Show and Steeplechase, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported that the “veteran Fort Snelling performer . . . was in good form and never jumped better in his life, in spite of advancing years.” Whiskey finished the year with wins at the Woodhill horse show in Wayzata and the state fair. That fall, Mrs. Haugen left the fort when her husband was transferred. Whiskey would perform several more times over the years but never again with the same energy and spirit.
In June 1934, when the fort was preparing to host the All-American Rodeo, Hazelrigg, on his way to a new assignment in Fargo, stopped in to see Whiskey. Eyewitnesses reported that the horse trotted over, whinnied, and rubbed his lips gently on the captain's face. The surprised officer told onlookers, “Gosh, I didn’t think Whiskey would remember that kissing stunt. I taught him that a long, long time ago.”

“In a horse can grin, that’s what one United States army horse was doing today at Fort Snelling,” the Minneapolis Star told its readers. The captain and Whiskey gave an impromptu show in which “the spirited horse soared over high hurdles, danced, picked up handkerchiefs and did other stunts ordinary horses never even think about while they are munching their oats.”

As a special event at the rodeo, “Fort Snelling’s Pride” went through his paces. This performance, Whiskey’s final exhibition under saddle, culminated with a leap through a circle of fire.

On June 22, two days before the rodeo ended, the Minneapolis Journal reported that Fort Snelling’s commandant, Brig. Gen. David L. Stone, announced it was “time to say ‘well done’” to Whiskey. “It is the general’s intention that Whiskey shall have no more ‘work’ to do. He will be well fed, well treated and ridden just enough to keep him in condition. For all practical purposes he is retired.” From here on out, there would only be “deep pastures, full feed bags and plenty of pleasant memories” for Whiskey, the paper stated. But the general also made it clear that this was not “going to be a complete and final retirement. . . . The army doesn’t do that with its horses. No ‘deadheads’ are carried on the army list.” Nevertheless, Whiskey’s fans were sure that he would “think it a very thorough going rest after the lifetime of activity that has been his.”

That announcement prompted new attempts to reunite Whiskey and Hazelrigg. Barbara Healy of St. Louis Park even wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, asking for his help. The letter was forwarded to Secretary of War George H. Dern, who replied:

“Whiskey” is an Army horse . . . he belongs to a regiment and to an Army post whose officers and men are proud of his achievements and very much attached to him; so much so, that when a few years ago the question of his sale came up, they refused to part with him. And I have no doubt they would refuse to do so again. At that time they thought, and I agree with them, that the regiment and the post had a higher claim upon him than any individual.

I have no doubt the officers and men at Fort Snelling will see that “Whiskey” enjoys a serene and comfortable old age, and I believe they are justly entitled to continued enjoyment of the pleasure which the presence and performance of this exceptional horse have brought to their regiment and their post.

In late August, a board of officers decided that Whiskey would be assigned a personal handler and turned out to pasture with 35-year-old retired army mules Snelling and Nat. The retirement orders read, “It would be a severe blow to the morale of officers and enlisted men if the animal should be sold or destroyed. The board recommends public horse Whiskey be classified as superannuated, retired and put out to pasture to die a natural death.”

Several years later when the fort commandant reigned as king of the 1939 St. Paul Winter Carnival, Whiskey took part in its military pageant and horse show. The Fort Snelling Bulletin related that in a “touching highlight” to the program, the “retired trooper” was led into the arena where he was presented to the dignitaries and given an honorary membership in the American Legion and Winter Carnival Committee.
By the early 1940s, the military had become fully motorized. Whiskey was the only army horse left at Fort Snelling, and the army stopped providing his forage. Privately owned and supported riding ponies remained at the fort, but field artillery horses and mules had been moved elsewhere. Whiskey could have accompanied them, but the Fort Snelling officers reportedly “didn’t think much of that idea.” As a result, some officers, including Whiskey’s handler, Sgt. Hurley Evans, paid for his oats, hay, and sugar treats. Knowing that they might not always be there to provide for him, the officers decided to hold a benefit. According to the press release, “Whiskey has announced he wants to do his part for national defense by helping to entertain selective service trainees and other soldiers stationed at Fort Snelling. Whiskey will perform some of his old stunts between boxing matches at the smoker and he will make future public appearances if his health will permit.”

“Whiskey’s eyesight is growing dim,” a local reporter revealed, and

his legs haven’t much of the old spring left, and he is growing a sizeable crop of grey whiskers, but the old wonderhorse of Fort Snelling is coming out of retirement once more—this time in his own personal defense program.

Whiskey, who will be 30 years old this spring according to army records, is finding his old age just a bit insecure. To be brutally frank about it, he’s a little short on hay.

At the March 12, 1941, benefit, Whiskey “stole the show,” as the Fort Snelling paper put it. He picked up the correct color handkerchief, found sugar in Sgt. Evans’s pockets, and stood with his front feet on a box. Then, riderless, the graying and bewhiskered horse capped off the exhibition by jumping over a flaming hurdle. That stunt put him on the front page of the next day’s Minneapolis Tribune. That same morning, the soldiers presented Whiskey with a feedbag filled with coins. His meal ticket was secured.

In September 1943 Hazelrigg, now a colonel, paid another visit to Fort Snelling to see the “old fellow.” The attachment between the two had not lessened with the passing years. When Whiskey caught sight of his friend, he walked a few steps then charged across the remaining distance as fast as his ancient legs would carry him. He nuzzled Hazelrigg affectionately, then stood quietly as the colonel “chatted with him in a language only he and
Whiskey know,” the Minneapolis Journal related. Hazelrigg spoke softly in the same unique way that, some 22 years earlier, had calmed and earned the trust of a wild horse. This quiet time shared by the two aging soldiers was their final visit.40

As the fort stables steadily emptied of private horses, Whiskey became lonely. His health deteriorated noticeably after the last horse, a mare named Chicken Little, to whom he was quite attached, was transferred to Texas. Late in the evening of December 30, 1943, fort officials announced that Whiskey had “died peacefully in his stable.” As they described it, “Old age just crept up and took him.” For the first time since 1820, Fort Snelling had no government-owned horse.41

At 11:30 a.m. on January 1, 1944, Whiskey was laid to rest with full military honors near the three huge elm trees that bordered the pasture in which he had spent his retirement years. Mourners stood solemnly in the snow as Commandant Col. Harry J. Keeley placed a wreath on the grave and taps sounded. The only gravesite within the boundaries of the fort, the spot was located on the northeast corner of the polo grounds.42

Learning of Whiskey’s death, Col. Hazelrigg wrote to Col. Keeley and enclosed a check for ten dollars, requesting that a Whiskey Memorial Fund be established. Keeley used the donation as partial payment for a grave marker, and the Officers’ Club paid the remainder. A likeness of Whiskey’s head was carved on the traditional white stone military marker above the inscription: “WHISKEY / A GREAT HORSE / A STOUT HEART / 1911–1943.”43

At the time of Whiskey’s burial, fort officials promised that his gravesite would “never be marred by roads.” However, Fort Snelling closed as a military post in 1946, and subsequent urban expansion necessitated additional thoroughfares. During the renovation of Highway 55 in 1964, Whiskey’s grave was moved to a location near the Bishop Whipple Federal Building on the fort grounds.44

In 2002 Whiskey’s remains, in the path of a light-rail system, were unearthed a second time for reburial in a Flag Day ceremony. This site, on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River, is adjacent to Historic Fort Snelling. The white picket fence around the grave is new, but the stone marker is the original. As has been the case since Whiskey’s burial in 1944, small bouquets of flowers continue to be placed anonymously on his grave.

Whiskey, a legend in the military and equine history of Minnesota, is part of the nation’s history as well. During his lifetime, army officers and enlisted men from all over the United States were assigned to Fort Snelling. Thousands spent time at the garrison referred to as the “Country Club of the Army” in the 1920s and 1930s. Thousands more received military training there before and during World War II. Since every soldier at the fort was acquainted with the post’s pet and mascot, the Minneapolis Star Journal’s epitaph rings true: “Any man ever stationed at Fort Snelling knew Whiskey’s story.” 40
Notes


2. Third Infantry photo album, Old Guard Museum, Fort Myer, VA (quotes); polo program, ca. 1924, Mary Anderson scrapbook, family collection; polo program, ca. 1924, Mary Anderson scrapbook, family collection; Minneapolis Tribune, Aug. 6, 1933, p. 8.

3. Author’s interview with Bill Robbins, former president of Minne- sota Horse Council, Aug. 26, 2002 (re- mount stations), and Alan Bogan, Old Guard Museum, Jan. 19, 2005 (motorization), notes in author’s possession; Fort Snelling Military Show Program, Sept. 20–23, 1922, p. 7, MHS.


11. Minneapolis Journal, Apr. 22, 1922, p. 2; “Civilian and Army Riders Compete,” clipping, 1922, J. Anderson scrapbook; Minneapolis Tribune, Aug. 29, 2002, notes in author’s possession. Lane rode and hunted at the fort; her husband, James, played polo there.


20. Secretary of War to Mr. Newton, “From 1934 File Whiskey Information,” original in Quartermaster General, RG 92, NARA.


27. Here and below, Minneapolis Tribune, June 17, 1934, p. 8.


34. Healy to Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Secretary of War George Dern to Healy, copies, “From 1934 File Whiskey Information,” originals in RG 92, NARA.


The photo on p. 344 is courtesy the author; all others are in MHS collections.