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Article Summary: Fort Niobrara was built in 1880 southeast of the Rosebud Agency in Nebraska, one of 10 Army posts built in the heart of what was Indian country. The fort was built as one of two large posts near the Brule Sioux and the more defiant Oglala.

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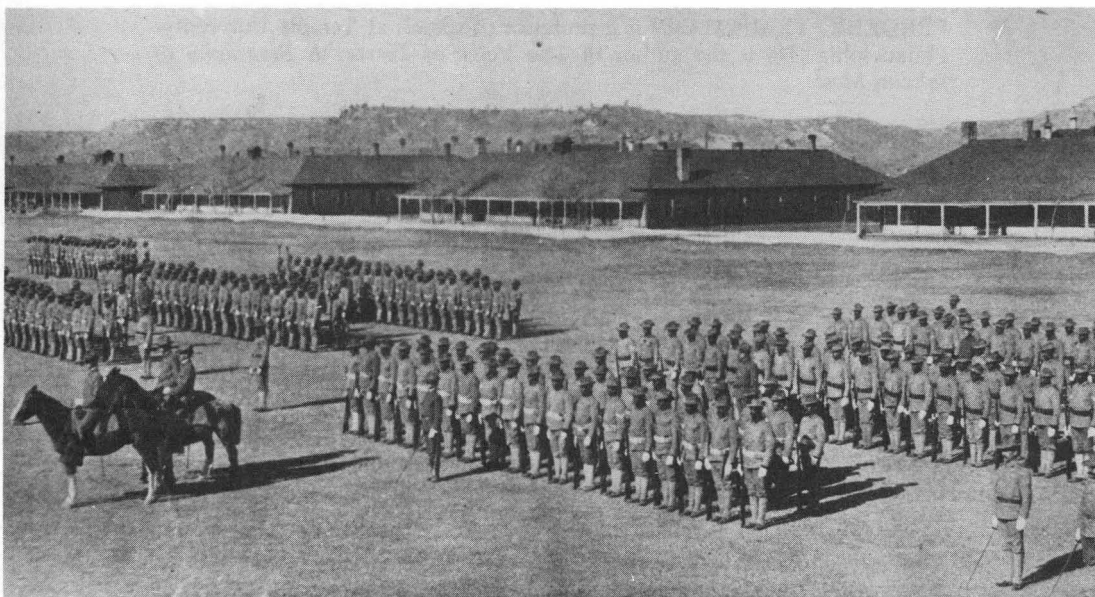
Names: Spotted Tail, General William Sherman, General George Crook, Major John J Upham, George Jewett, J M Tacher, Castigan (soldier), Crow Dog, Samuel Cherry, General August V Kautz, Frederick Benteen, Lieutenant Colonel James Brisbin, Private Hoolohan, Jerry White, Mattie Anderson, Sergeant Nolan, Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka, Alfred T Smith, John J Pershing, Edward E Dravo, Stephen B Elkins, Lieutenant General Adna Chaffee, J W Gilbert, Corporal Ernst Wagner

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Photographs / Images: Fort Niobrara from north side of Niobrara River, 1886; 25th Infantry Regiment on parade ground, 1904; Fort Niobrara guard mount, 1899; Second fort administration building, erected in 1893; 4th of July salute, 1899; Sixth Cavalry dress parade, early 1890s; Eighth Infantry, 1887; Map of Fort Niobrara, April 1881.



Fort Niobrara from north side of Niobrara River, 1886....(Below) 25th Infantry Regiment (Negro) on parade ground, 1904. John Anderson Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.



Fort Niobrara, 1880-1906: Guardian of the Rosebud Sioux

By Thomas R. Buecker

Within two years of the Custer defeat in 1876, the Sioux Indians were largely confined to the Great Sioux Reservation of western South Dakota. Immediately the Army began to build large military posts in the heart of what was Indian country and around the reservation boundaries. The posts were large six to 12 company posts, much larger than many of the earlier posts of the Indian War period. By 1880 construction was under way or completed on 10 Army posts in Montana, the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Wyoming. Selected existing posts were improved and enlarged.

Military posts near the Sioux Reservation were Fort Robinson (established 1874), in northwestern Nebraska; Fort Meade (1878), to the northeast of the Black Hills; Fort McKinney (1877), west of the Powder River country in Wyoming; Fort Yates (1874), at the Standing Rock Agency in North Dakota; Fort Sully, near the Cheyenne River Agency; Fort Randall, established earlier southeast of the Sioux Reservation; and Fort Niobrara (1880), southeast of the Rosebud Agency in Nebraska. To the south along the Union Pacific Railroad, Fort D. A. Russell at Cheyenne and Fort Sidney, Nebraska, could be called upon to provide backup support in times of need. Camp Sheridan, established at the first Spotted Tail Agency in Nebraska, was garrisoned until 1881. The newly constructed Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad south of the Nebraska-South Dakota border, could be utilized for troop reinforcements in case of trouble.

The establishment of forts and the growing network of railroads brought about a great change to the military frontier in the 1880s. By 1877-1878, the Sioux tribes were restricted largely to the Dakota reservations, but it was uncertain that they would remain there. Military strategy was altered by a

new plan of surrounding the reservation with a circle of military posts. Building posts around the Sioux lands placed the Army in a better position for military actions against groups of potential hostiles than heretofore available. After this the Indians lived in certainty that the soldiers would always be nearby.

In 1878 the agency for Spotted Tail's Brule Sioux was removed from a Missouri River site, to a new location they selected some 100 miles inland to the west. Here the Rosebud Agency was established for the Upper Brule, then numbering about 4,000. The apprehension by settlers in Nebraska that some of the Indians would break away from the reservation and raid to the south led to the desirability of a nearby military post. The new post would guard the Rosebud Agency and "give greater security to the settlers and. . .protect the interests of cattle ranches in that section."¹ An Army bill approved by Congress on June 23, 1879, appropriated \$50,000 for the construction of a new post in northern Nebraska or in Dakota. General William Sherman delegated the assignment of selecting a site to General George Crook, commanding officer of the Department of the Platte.

In the summer of 1879 Crook selected a site south of the Spotted Tail Agency and midway between the mouth of the Niobrara River and Camp Sheridan. The fort was to be built on a broad, level plain rising on the south bank of the Niobrara River, across from the mouth of the Minnechaduzza Creek. The site was well-watered with nearby springs, and a good supply of timber was found along the river. Sherman approved the site, and the reservation for the new post was established by executive order on December 10, 1879. Reserved were nearly 10 square miles of public lands for military use. The post was 7 miles south of the Sioux Reservation and about 40 miles from Rosebud Agency. Although nearby, it was located off the reservation to avoid the friction that could develop.

Fort Niobrara drew its name from the river nearby. It was established for a somewhat different purpose than the other posts built in the Department of the Platte. Forts Kearny and Laramie were established to protect the overland wagon routes. Forts Russell and Sidney were built for the protection of the railroad. Fort Niobrara's mission was similar to that of Fort Robinson's some 160 miles west; the latter was first built

to control Red Cloud Agency No. 2 in northwestern Nebraska. After the new Pine Ridge Agency was established in South Dakota in 1878, the post continued to guard the Oglalas there. With the establishment of Fort Niobrara, the Army would have two large posts near the Brule Sioux and the more defiant Oglala.

On April 22, 1880, Companies B, C, and F of the 5th Cavalry and Company B of the 9th Infantry, under the command of Major John J. Upham, 5th Cavalry, arrived to establish the new post.² A tent camp to house the nine officers and 217 enlisted men was set up. Sites for the new buildings were determined and construction began. By the end of the month, a steam sawmill was cutting nearby pine into usable lumber. The plan of the post called for an east-west parade ground just west of several springs that flowed into the Niobrara River. The post would follow the typical layout of frontier posts: barracks and stables on one side of the parade ground and officers' quarters on the other. Because of the abundance of clay near the immediate site, adobe brick was used for the primary construction material on as many of the buildings as possible.

To aid the soldiers in construction of the post, the Quartermaster Department hired civilian carpenters and laborers during that first summer. So many men came from settlements to the east seeking employment that a surplus of workers developed. A civilian stone cutter and stone breakers were hired to cut and form foundation blocks from siliceous limestone out-croppings near the post. While quarrying limestone in July, a serious accident occurred during blasting operations. Two men were tamping in a charge when it exploded, horribly mangling both.³

At the time the post was established, Neligh, Nebraska, was the nearest railroad on the FE&MV, some 158 miles eastward. Some interest was expressed in establishing North Platte on the Union Pacific Railroad as the main shipping point. Although it was a shorter route from North Platte, the road through the Sandhills was more difficult to traverse, and the Neligh route along the Elkhorn Valley proved to be more popular. The round trip from Fort Niobrara to Neligh could be made in 10 days with ease, and there were a few settlements along the way to service travelers.

Until the railroad moved farther west, Neligh served as the departure point for bull trains loaded with supplies for the new post. Freight was transferred from boxcars to wagons at Neligh. George Jewett, one of the main freight contractors, charged \$1.87½ per 100 pounds for hauling in summer months and \$2.34 in the winter.⁴ With huge quantities of freight accumulating in Neligh, an Army officer was detailed there to expedite freight shipments to Fort Niobrara. A stage line was also established from Neligh to the fort in 1880. During the peak period of freighting by wagon, the Quartermaster Department employed nearly 60 teamsters to augment civilian freight contractors. By July, 1881, the railroad was extended west to O'Neill City, and Neligh ceased to be the supply point. By early 1883 the railroad was within 6 miles of the post, and use of large bull trains ceased.

Construction of the buildings for the post continued into the summer. It did not take long for the development of petty grievances and quarrels associated with enlisted life at military posts to surface at the new post. On July 4 a group of soldiers clubbed together to give a dance. After several hours of beer drinking, a few soldiers got into a disagreement. One man struck another on the head with a carpenter's mallet, inflicting serious injury. Another incident occurred the same day as the accident at the stone quarry. A Company D soldier named Castigan, who had returned to the post drunk, failed to turn out at stable call. When his sergeant entered his tent to order him out, the intoxicated soldier shot him. The sergeant died of the wound, and Castigan was placed in custody to await trial for murder. Although there had been a feud between the two men, the murder was unexpected and drew strong condemnation from the men of Company D. Such violence was infrequent at Fort Niobrara.⁵

J. M. Thacher became the first post trader, a position he held for many years. He also served settlers in the vicinity. He built both a log store and saloon in line with the barracks row and a short distance from the west end of the parade ground.

Scattered bands of Indians came from the north to view the building activity on the Niobrara River. On occasion chiefs from the Rosebud Agency in South Dakota visited the new post. In August, Brule Chief Spotted Tail called on Major John J. Upham. This could have been his only visit to the post

established to guard his agency. A year later Spotted Tail was shot and killed by Crow Dog. His assassin was arrested by Indian police and brought to the Fort Niobrara guard house to await trial.⁶

On November 24, 1880, soldiers were moved into the buildings. With the exception of the quartermaster and commissary storehouses, the buildings were not completed but were habitable. Work still continued on the post hospital on a small rise northeast of the parade ground. Five spacious double sets of officers' quarters and a single house for the commanding officer were built. The quarters were made of adobe brick with wide verandas on the front extending along both sides of the wings to the rear. North of the commanding officer's quarters on the east side of the parade ground, the headquarters building housed the adjutant and other offices. Constructed of brick, it was utilized until its destruction by fire in the early 1890s.

On the north side were four enlisted men's barracks, three for cavalry and one for infantry companies. The cavalry barracks were slightly larger than those for the infantry, measuring 30x120 feet with a kitchen and mess room wing 30x60 feet. An adobe guard house was built at the northwestern corner of the parade ground. North of it were the commissary and quartermaster storehouses, a bakery, and shops for the carpenter and blacksmith. Until three cavalry stables were completed, horses were temporarily sheltered by slab sheds at the corrals. Thus, the command was under roof for most of the first winter.

To provide water for the post, a 16' Halladay windmill was erected over a well, and a 14x20-foot tank holding 33,000 gallons of water was placed to the north of the headquarters building. Later, the springs to the southeast of the post were dammed to create a reservoir. A pump house elevated water through pipes to the tank. Water was piped to the barracks and officers' quarters.⁷

Although the post was originally to house four companies, its layout design left an area to the west for possible expansion and larger garrisons. With this plan and a spacious location, Fort Niobrara was one of the best-planned military posts on the plains.

In June, 1881, the military reservation was enlarged to 55 square miles by inclusion of a wood and timber reserve. Later the reservation was modified to omit four quarter-sections that were held by a settler on a preemption claim. On February 29, 1883, Congress granted a 100-foot right of way through the reservation to accommodate tracks of the FE&MV Railroad. It also granted to the railroad a plot for the construction of a side switch and station on the reservation.⁸

From 1880 to 1885 Fort Niobrara was a four-company post. Its garrison consisted of two or three troops of the 5th Cavalry and one or two companies of the 4th and 9th Infantry. During this period the troop strength of the post averaged 200 to 300 officers and enlisted men. As the garrison was largely of the 5th Cavalry, field grade officers of that regiment served as commanding officers of the post. Cavalry troops could be utilized for scouting and patrolling and for pursuit if needed. The less mobile infantry soldiers were used for guards and escorts for freight moving north to the agency.

In the years before effective civil law enforcement, the military presence deterred lawlessness and crime on both sides of the reservation line. One episode of the Army's law enforcement resulted in the murder of Lieutenant Samuel Cherry, 5th Cavalry, for whom Cherry County was named. On May 10, 1881, Lieutenant Cherry led a small detachment in pursuit of several robbery suspects who had also stolen government horses from the post. The next day Cherry was shot by a drunken member of the patrol. The murderer and the robbery suspects were eventually captured. Cherry was buried in the post cemetery, but his body was exhumed and transported to a family plot in La Grange, Indiana. With the organization of the new county in 1883, citizens successfully petitioned the Legislature to have it named to honor Cherry.

The military policy of the late 1870s and early 1880s brought a change to the Army troop distribution on the upper plains. By 1881 after the removal of most Indians from Nebraska, Forts Hartsuff and McPherson, Camp Sheridan, and the post of North Platte Station were abandoned. A number of posts along the Missouri River were also closed.⁹ Part of the change was credited to the growth of railroad lines in the region around the Sioux Reservation. The Army greatly benefited from railroad expansion of the 1880s in the shipment of sup-

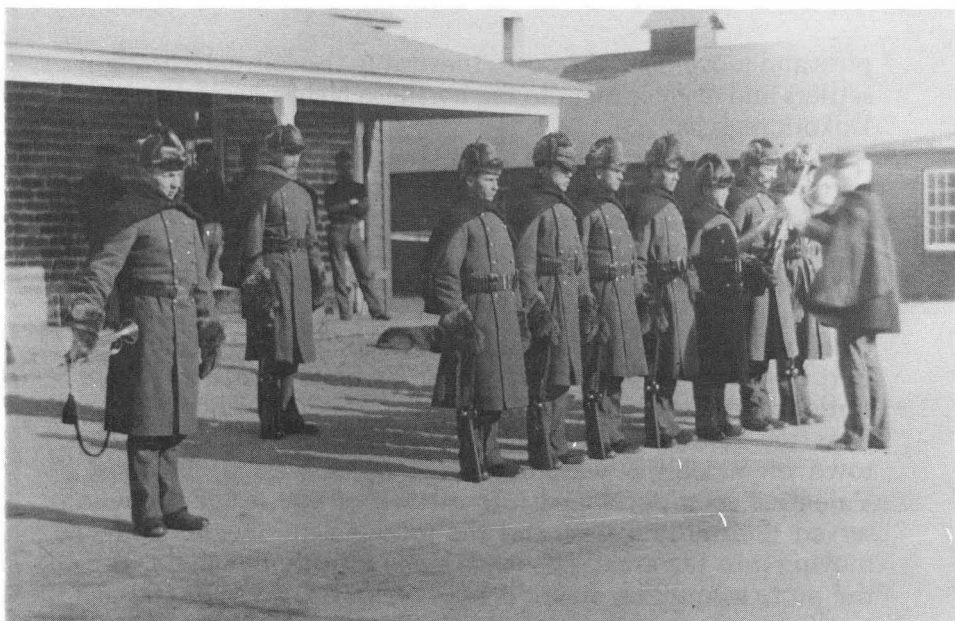
plies and movement of troops. Inevitably the railroads brought settlers and development to the northern Nebraska and eastern Dakota regions.

Fort Niobrara was never as isolated as were many frontier posts. Besides moving expeditiously men and supplies, the FE&MV railroad gave easy access to functions up and down its line. Post baseball teams used the railroad; military personnel used it to attend social events at department headquarters in Omaha and at Fort Robinson. In 1888 a passenger coach of black soldiers of the 9th Cavalry and their ladies came from Fort Robinson to attend a hop given by units of their regiment stationed at Fort Niobrara.

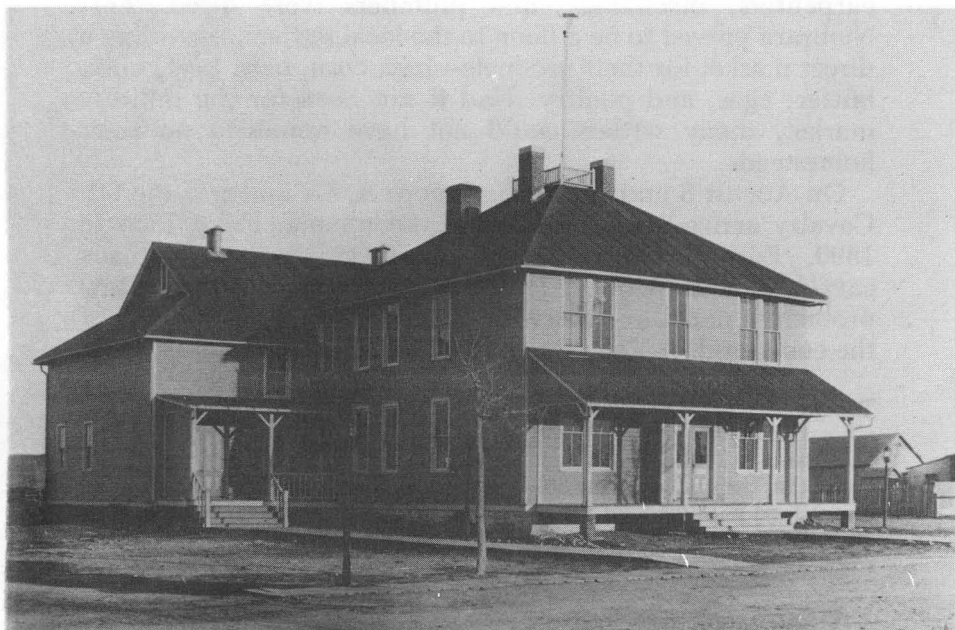
As the railroad reached Fort Niobrara in 1882-1883, the town of Valentine was founded 4 miles west of the post. Valentine soon developed into a town of 400 residents, who served the military post and the growing number of settlers moving into the area. The town economically benefited from the post, as military payrolls brought in nearly \$170,000 annually, and the disbursements for the commissary and quartermaster departments at the post aggregated about as much.¹⁰ Small numbers of civilian blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and teamsters were employed at the post and on occasion carpenters, mechanics, and plumbers were hired. Fort Niobrara proved to be a boon to the local settlers, providing a direct market for their products—hay, corn, oats, beef, milk, butter, eggs, and poultry. Had it not been for the military market, many settlers could not have remained on their homesteads.

On August 8 and 14, 1885, Troops A, G, and I of the 9th Cavalry arrived from Fort Reno, Oklahoma. From 1885 to 1890, Fort Niobrara had a mixed garrison with black cavalymen and white infantry units. During this period few problems, racial or otherwise, arose between the soldiers of the command. A Valentine paper proudly stated:

Too great credit cannot be given [Bvt.] General [August V.] Kautz and the officers and men of his command for the gentlemanly and soldierly way they have treated the people of Valentine and its surroundings. Upon every hand is said that the soldiers of the 8th Infantry and 9th Cavalry are all that could be deserved as soldiers for the protection of the people hereabouts. Race or color does not enter here. The officers of the two regiments here are men in whom the people have the greatest liking.¹¹



Fort Niobrara guard mount, 1899....(Below) Second fort administration building, erected in 1893. Courtesy of National Archives.



One of the officers serving with the 9th Cavalry was Major Frederick Benteen of Custer Little Big Horn battle fame, who arrived for duty in June, 1886. After three days of duty, Benteen was allowed to remain in his quarters on sick leave. One month later he was admitted to the Army and Navy Hospital at Hot Springs, Arkansas; he retired in September. Benteen was one of the most recognized of the many officers stationed at the post, although his service there was short.

Another famous 9th Cavalry officer was Lieutenant Colonel James Brisbin, who served at the post for two years. Brisbin, a favorite with the citizens of Valentine, was famous for his promotion of livestock raising in the West.¹²

In 1885 with the arrival of the 9th Cavalry, additional quarters were needed. That fall construction work started on three additional double sets of officers' quarters, three stables, and two enlisted men's barracks. Soldiers, at first making 7,000 adobe building bricks per day, by October increased their output to 10,000 per day.

Buildings were built in the style of existing units. In order to facilitate the expansion of the parade ground, the post guard house was razed and the 1880 commissary warehouse remodeled into a new guard house. A new and larger commissary-quartermaster warehouse complex was later built north of the new guard house. The west end of the parade ground was again left open to allow for further expansion.

During this phase of construction, no additional civilian workers were hired and the labor was furnished by enlisted men. During September and October, Company F, 9th Infantry, molded adobe bricks and Company H sawed logs on the timber reserve. This followed the apparent trend of the times, with soldiers providing common labor at western posts.

Because of the more peaceful nature of the Rosebud Sioux, soldiers from Fort Niobrara were seldom called to field service. This condition was attributed to the fact that after the death of Spotted Tail, the Brule had no strong leader as was Red Cloud at the Pine Ridge Agency. Therefore, duties for the troops at the post were limited to garrison duties and escorts, much the same as performed at other northern plains posts of the period. During the early phase of the post's existence, as seen, the soldiers spent much of their time with construction activities. Normal fatigue duties were performed daily, with

wood chopping details sent to the reserve as needed. Soldiers improved the road to Valentine and worked on the bridge across the Niobrara River.

One major duty was to provide escorts for shipment of supplies and beef to the Rosebud Agency. During the 1880s some 8,000,000 pounds of supplies were shipped, and 6,000 beeves were driven from Valentine to the agency, most of it handled by Indian teamsters or drovers.

As the frontier closed, soldiers sought to deter whites who illegally grazed cattle on Indian lands. Two of the biggest problems reported by the Indian agents were rustling of Indian-owned cattle and trespassing on Indian range by cattle owned by whites. Protection of the rights and property of the Rosebud Sioux was a function delegated to troops at Fort Niobrara. Indians in large numbers occasionally came to the post to visit. On July 3, 1889, some 266 Indians from the Rosebud came down to Fort Niobrara for a Fourth of July celebration. That day many of the men charged through Valentine "nearly scaring some people to death."¹³ The next day the Indians staged a war dance on the parade ground lasting from 11 a.m. until 6 p.m. Such demonstrations fully demonstrated to the citizens that they needed the services provided by the nearby post.

With its quiet existence and lack of field service in the early 1880s, Fort Niobrara officers scheduled practice marches. The troops often marched for four or five days, sometimes covering over 100 miles in the summer months. While in the field, the troops practiced small unit tactics, learned range estimation, and built field fortifications.

In addition, the men received training in outpost and picket duty, advance and rear guard, flankers and skirmishers, and making and breaking encampment. After a march west of Valentine in 1884 by two cavalry companies, the Valentine paper commented: "They put in a hard day's work, and the majority of them have come to the conclusion that a soldier's life is not so easy after all."¹⁴

Rifle marksmanship training was accelerated in the frontier Army during the 1880s. In the summer months troops put in days at the firing range, and during the winter months continued with gallery practice indoors. Duty at the range proved to be hazardous. In May, 1888, Private Hoolohan of Company

A, 8th Infantry, was seriously wounded while on target duty. After placing a target he was accidentally shot before getting back under cover. A year later a 9th Cavalry trumpeter on duty at the range was thrown from his horse against a telephone pole while firing from horseback and died from his injuries.¹⁵

In 1888 and 1889 soldiers participated in large camps of instruction. Field training became large scale maneuvers with thousands of men from various regiments assembled for several weeks of work. In 1888 six companies of the 8th Infantry and two troops of the 9th Cavalry marched to Camp Brooke on Bordeaux Creek near Chadron in a six-weeks exercise.

The next year a battalion marched to Camp Crook near Fort Robinson for training. Through marches, target practice, and camps of instruction, the soldiers received field training that had previously been received only through actual combat and campaigning. By the time of the Spanish-American War, the Army reached such a degree of training that several historians have credited it with being the best-trained Army in the world.¹⁶

Social life at the post followed the military caste system of the era. Officers and their wives tended to turn to what they thought more refined and dignified means of entertainment. Social rules called for exchanges of visits between families along officers' row. Amateur theatricals and musicals were held in officers' houses and later in the post hall. A tennis court was built for the officers in 1886. Riding in the surrounding hills and plains occupied many off-duty hours for officers and ladies. Organization of a good string orchestra led to a series of weekly dances. Prominent civilians from town were often invited to attend social events. Officers and their wives were invited to parties and dinners in town, and a number held memberships in lodges and participated in GAR (Union veterans) activities.

For the enlisted men life at frontier military posts turned out to be mostly an unchanging routine of fatigue duty and drill. Unless on detached service or in the field, the enlisted men faced a monotonous existence. Off-duty activities were usually the same at all western posts. The post trader's saloon, later replaced by the post canteen, was a popular place for passing time. Inevitably, a civilian population of questionable morali-

ty mushroomed around a frontier post. As early as June, 1880, three prostitutes from Omaha were reported at Neligh on their way to Fort Niobrara.¹⁷ Shortly afterward, several so-called "hog ranches" were established just off the military reservation. The Deer Park Hotel, a combination saloon and hotel, was built on the north side of the Niobrara River. About 2 miles east of the post, there was Casterline's Ranch, which provided whiskey, gambling, dancing, and other entertainment for the soldiers. After the bi-monthly payday, card sharpers occasionally entered the post and attempted to relieve soldiers of their money at cards or other games. Some civilians even entered the barracks to collect debts, much to the annoyance of the troops. In 1883 orders were issued barring civilians from the barracks to play cards or collect debts.¹⁸ After the establishment of Valentine, soldiers were issued town passes. On one occasion a cavalryman lost his way on the return trip in a winter storm. The next day he was found frozen to death on the ice of the Niobrara River.

The transfer of the 9th Cavalry to Fort Niobrara brought a large number of Negroes to the predominantly white northern Nebraska. A number of black camp followers and other civilians soon arrived in Valentine. A small settlement of black civilians grew to the south of the railroad. In 1887 a black civilian, "who gave the name of Jerry White," was jailed in nearby Long Pine for allegedly raping a white Valentine woman, seized by a mob, and hanged.¹⁹ This was probably the worst race incident during the period that the 9th Cavalry was at Fort Niobrara, but it did not involve soldiers. Relations between the blacks and whites at the post were good, and about the only violent incidents involving 9th Cavalrymen were among themselves. A dive kept by Mattie Anderson along Minnechaduzza Creek west of the post was the scene of a killing involving black troopers. After quarreling over one of the prostitutes, a private shot and killed Sergeant Nolan of Troop G. Mattie Anderson's house was the scene of other violent incidents during the latter 1880s. Inter-regimental quarreling and bad blood caused at least one other death in the 9th Cavalry while the regiment was stationed at the post.²⁰

Far better means of entertainment were maintained for the soldiers of the post. Enlisted men held dances, formal and informal, with invitations for their company officers to attend.

Dances and hops provided good entertainment for the men, but the officers were instructed to refrain from participating in dancing at events organized at the private expense of the enlisted men.

Baseball was played with considerable enthusiasm, and post teams had home-and-away series with teams at Ainsworth, Neligh, and other nearby settlements. Fort Robinson proved a formidable opponent, defeating the Fort Niobrara team 21 to 20 in an 1889 match. Soldiers energetically planned celebrations and special events. After a Fourth of July observance the paper commented, "The celebration at the fort was a decided success in every way. The soldiers certainly understand how to manage affairs [so] that visitors can not be otherwise than pleased."²¹

After the completion of new warehouses, the old 1880 quartermaster building was converted into a post hall and became the center for post activities. Social events and other activities were held there for officers and enlisted men alike. In line with a popular fad of the day, a minstrel company was organized and entertained on the post and in town. During the late 1880s a series of lectures and entertainments were held in the hall. In January, 1888, there were three lectures: "A Field for the Army in Times of Peace," presented by Colonel August V. Kautz, the post commander; "Rear Guard of Armies"; and a scientific talk, "Hydrogen Light and the Sciopticon." The last event of the month was a "Jubilee Concert" given by the members of the 9th Cavalry.²² The 8th Infantry band presented concerts in the hall during the winter months. The officers and ladies of the post put on dramatic presentations and plays. In 1890 Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka lectured before a full house on his adventures in the Arctic regions and the search for the ill-fated Franklin party.

The end of the decade of the 1880s saw a change to the state of affairs for the soldiers and settlers around the post. Although the Sioux were placed on the reservations, the government completely failed in its attempt to convert them to the white man's ways. Throughout the 1880s the programs designed to encourage the Sioux to give up their native way of life only led to a deterioration of white-Indian reservations. To compound the situation, a severe drouth struck the Dakotas and those on the reservations suffered greatly. Through the

summer of 1890, Brule families came from the agency to beg food at the post and at Valentine.²³ In desperation the Indians turned to the new belief of the Messiah and the Ghost Dance for a return to the old way of life. By September, when the Ghost Dance reached the Rosebud people, the dance mania was at its highest level on the Sioux reservations.

Fear of Messiah-crazed hostiles storming down from the reservations led to nervousness and outright panic by settlers of northern Nebraska bordering the reservations. In some localities settlers formed home guard companies or took measures to defend themselves. Isolated homes were barricaded, and small fortifications were thrown up at specific points in case of an outbreak. This fear led many to flee their homesteads for towns they thought more secure. Much of the anxiety created that fall and winter could be credited to the sensational newspaper coverage of the situation.

Events leading up to the 1890 Pine Ridge outbreak and the consequent military action have been well covered by historians.²⁴ As it turned out, most of the trouble and all the fighting were limited to the Pine Ridge Reservation, but it was feared that a volatile situation existed on the Rosebud Reservation. As a result, it was determined to send soldiers there, and the garrison at Fort Niobrara was alerted for field service. On November 19, Companies A, B, and H of the 8th Infantry and Troops A and G of the 9th Cavalry, 15 officers and 217 enlisted men under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alfred T. Smith, marched to the Rosebud Agency with a Hotchkiss cannon and a Gatling gun. Ten wagons of supplies, four escort wagons, and one ambulance also accompanied the column. Upon arrival the troops established a field camp and dug trenches on the hills surrounding the agency buildings. For the next several months the men settled in to keep the peace among the Brule.

After the sending of nearly the entire garrison of Fort Niobrara to the Rosebud, the citizens of Valentine were apprehensive about the decrease of soldiers. The local editor urged that a regiment of cavalry should be stationed at Fort Niobrara immediately "in order to restore confidence and furnish protection to the settlers who are exposed to danger should the hostiles make a dash in this direction."²⁵ The military, aware that an immediate solution to the problem

was needed, sent more troops into the Sioux reservation area than had been assembled at any time between the Civil War and the Spanish-American War. Additional troops for the Rosebud Reservation soon arrived at Fort Niobrara and were sent north. In late November four companies of the 21st Infantry arrived from Fort Sidney and were sent to the Rosebud Agency. On December 2, 102 recruits for the 8th and 21st Infantry Regiments reached the post and were shortly afterward transferred to their companies in the field. The next week the headquarters staff and seven companies of the 1st Infantry, almost the entire regiment, marched into Fort Niobrara. On Christmas Day they were sent to the field for duty. Throughout the campaign Fort Niobrara served as an important point for sending men and supplies north to the reservations.

After the Wounded Knee fight on December 28, hostile bands still absent from the agencies straggled in and surrendered. By the middle of January, 1891, the situation on the reservation was calm enough that the great massed army was ordered to return to their stations. That month the headquarters and most of the 8th Infantry that had been stationed at Fort Niobrara since 1886 were transferred to Fort McKinney, Wyoming. The two troops of the 9th Cavalry were also transferred. On February 9, 1891, the new garrison—headquarters, band, and four companies of the 6th Cavalry—arrived at Fort Niobrara. Assigned to the 6th was 2nd Lieutenant John J. Pershing, who later rose to fame as the commander of the American Expeditionary Force in World War I. Lieutenant Pershing was on detached duty at the Rosebud Agency for some months until he arrived at the post. In September he was assigned as a military science instructor at the University of Nebraska. Later he was promoted to 1st Lieutenant with the 9th Cavalry, where his association with the black troopers led to his nickname, "Black Jack." In March, 1891, Company B, 8th Infantry and a hospital corps detachment returned to the post from the Rosebud Agency. They were the last troops from the post remaining in the field from the winter campaign—the largest campaign of the Indian War, and the only campaign in which Fort Niobrara soldiers participated.

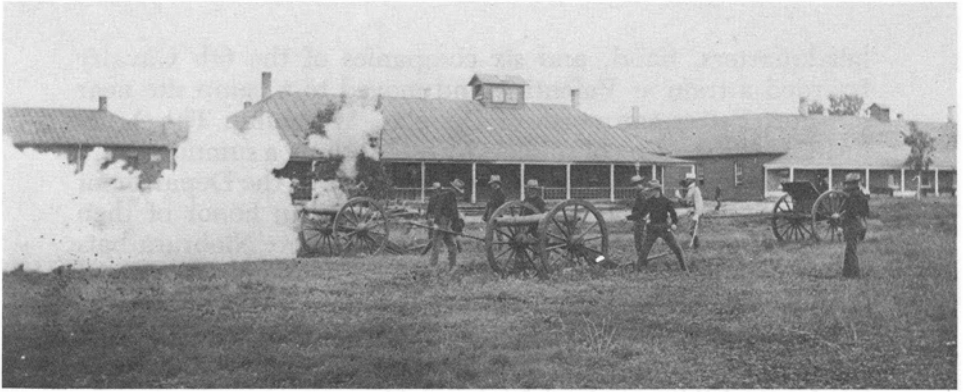
During the 1890s Fort Niobrara reached its zenith as a

military post. Between 1887 and the middle 1890s extensive building took place at the post, with added quarters, a new administration building, school and chapel, quartermaster and commissary warehouses, and additions to the post hospital. At the west end of the parade ground several large frame officers' quarters were erected, a departure from the adobe construction used previously. Part of the expansion resulted when Fort Niobrara became a regimental headquarters post with larger garrisons. During this period the post served as headquarters for the 8th and 12th Infantry Regiments and the 6th Cavalry Regiment.

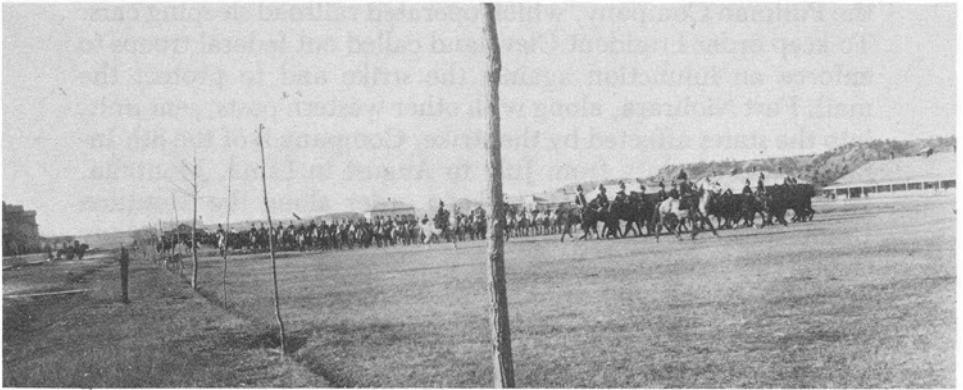
Because of the events of the winter of 1890, the necessity of troop presence near the reservations still existed, extending the usefulness of the post of Fort Niobrara. After the winter campaign the garrison increased to eight companies, a total strength of over 500 men. During much of the decade, six companies of cavalry and two of infantry comprised the garrison.

At this time an interesting experiment was conducted by the Army. Indians were enlisted into the *regular* service, not just as scouts as had been done previously. One company of Indian soldiers was to be assigned to selected regiments in the West. During the spring of 1891, Sioux Indians were enlisted at the Rosebud Agency. In April Lieutenant Edward E. Dravo and 54 men of the Indian company, designated Troop L, 6th Cavalry, arrived at Fort Niobrara presenting a "very respectable appearance."²⁶ They performed the usual fatigue duties and drill with their white counterparts and participated in marches with other 6th Cavalry troops. For additional training the Indian troops made reconnaissance marches on the Rosebud Reservation. In October, 1892, Troop L Indians and other troops of the 6th Cavalry, traveled to the Columbia Exposition in Chicago as part of the Army representation. Although the attempt was conscientiously pursued, the Indian-as-soldiers project began to fail, and by 1895 most of the Indian companies, including Troop L, 6th Cavalry, were disbanded.²⁷

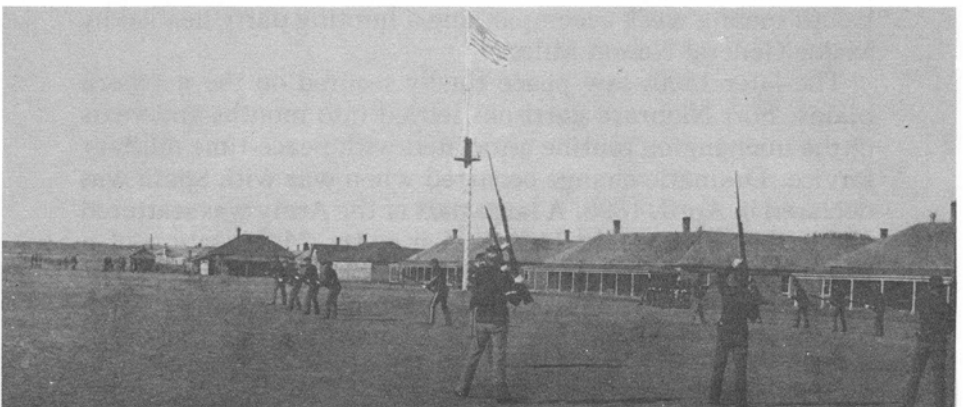
In the 1890s Fort Niobrara soldiers were called out to help keep the peace in several widespread civil disturbances. In 1892 after the Johnson County War which involved the large cattlemen and small ranchers, troops were sent into Wyoming to prevent possible civil disruptions. In June of that year,



4th of July salute, fired in front of guard house, 1899. Courtesy of National Archives.



6th Cavalry on dress parade, early 1890s. Courtesy of Rushville Museum.



8th Infantry on parade ground, 1887.

headquarters, band, and six companies of the 6th Cavalry boarded a train at Valentine and moved to a camp site near old Fort Fetterman north of Douglas, Wyoming. The Army justified the sending of soldiers by establishing a summer camp of instruction, as had been previously done in the Department of the Platte. It was named Camp Elkins in honor of then Secretary of War Stephen B. Elkins. The Fort Niobrara battalion remained there until early fall. By September the situation cooled, although federal intervention was protested by Wyoming citizens. That month four troops of the 6th were returned to the post, and on November 27, the last two troops left Camp Elkins for Fort Niobrara.²⁸

In the summer of 1894, most western states were caught up in a large-scale railroad strike originating in Chicago against the Pullman Company, which operated railroad sleeping cars. To keep order President Cleveland called out federal troops to enforce an injunction against the strike and to protect the mail. Fort Niobrara, along with other western posts, sent units into the states affected by the strike. Company B of the 8th Infantry was on duty from July to August in Lima, Montana, assisting federal marshals to keep order along the Montana Union Railroad, a branch line of the Union Pacific. Company G protected railroad shops and yards at Laramie, Wyoming, during the strike. At Laramie troops camped on the grounds of the UPRR until August. One reason for Fort Niobrara's longevity was its location on the FE&MV railroad, which permitted quick dispatch of troops to Indian or civilian disturbances. Later that year a company of the 6th Cavalry was sent on a non-military detail to Wood Lake, Nebraska. There troops spent a week accompanying a hunting party headed by Major General Nelson Miles.

The later 1890s saw peace finally secured on the northern plains. Fort Niobrara garrisons settled into months and years of the unchanging routine associated with peace-time military service. Dramatic change occurred when war with Spain was declared in April, 1898. A large part of the Army was scattered about the West at old Indian War posts. Mobilization of a larger Army resulted in western posts being stripped of their garrisons and the troops hurried to southern ports for a possible invasion of Cuba. On April 17 headquarters and eight

companies of the 12th Infantry, boarded a train at Valentine and left Fort Niobrara for New Orleans.

For the next four years Fort Niobrara was reduced from a large, regimental headquarters post to a skeleton garrison of one company. The troop levels at the post dropped from nearly 600 to less than 100 and once to a mere 27. The diminutive garrison continued to function with drills and guard mounts.

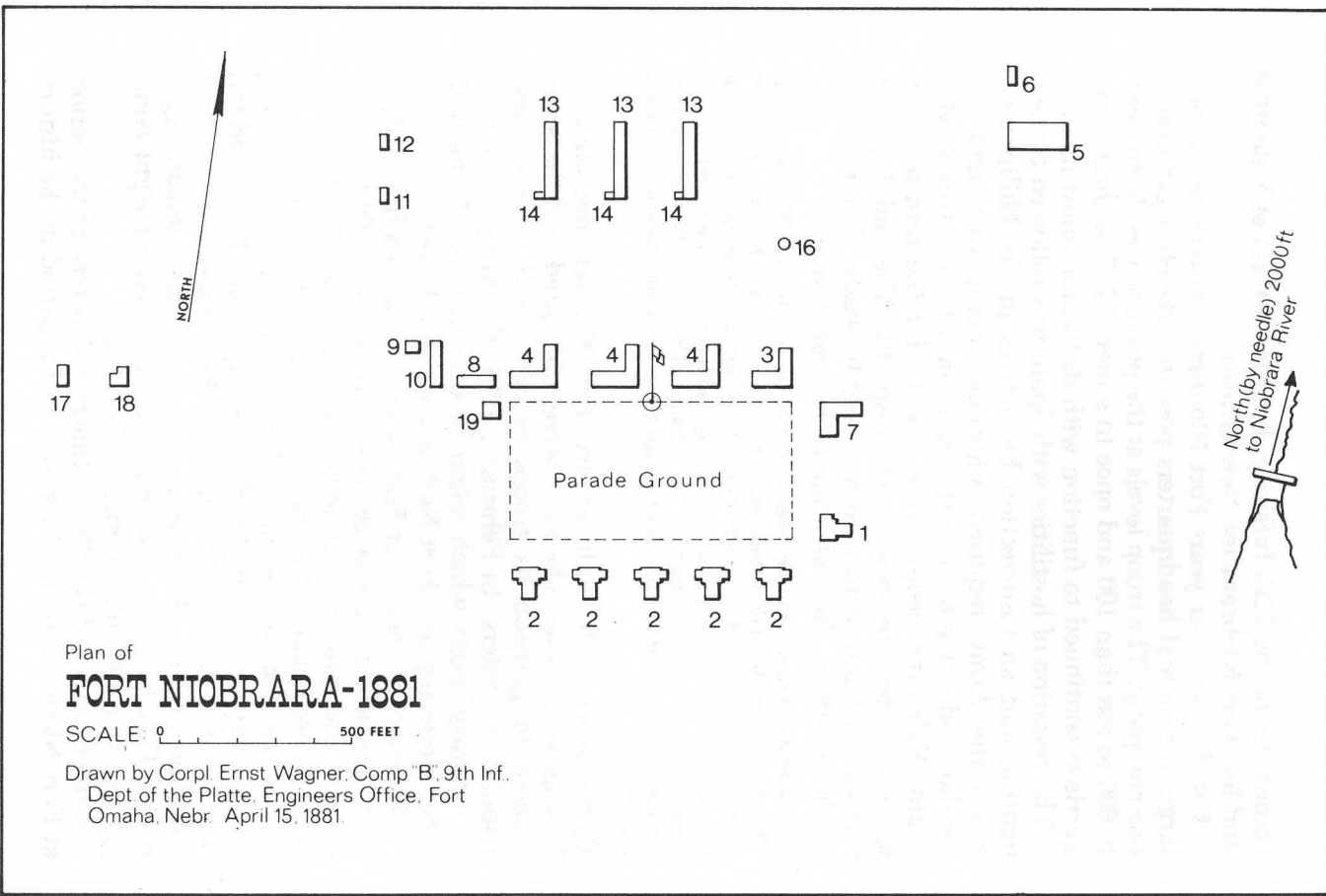
The cessation of hostilities with Spain was followed by new fighting and an insurrection by natives in the Philippines. Again the Army required additional manpower, and the regulars did not return to the garrison after the treaty with Spain. Valentine people were anxious for the return of the soldiers, whose presence meant prosperity. The buildings and reservation lands seemed to be going to waste. Commenting on the situation, the *Valentine Democrat* stated:

We understand there is to be several companies sent to Fort Niobrara soon. This should have been done long ago. Our people are very patient, but when continuously neglected are ready to make a complaint to either make use of the post at this place or get out of the way and let citizens use it and the vast area of the ground surrounding it. Uncle Sam has been very dilatory concerning the occupation of this post for the past three years and there is room for a kick.²⁹

By the dawn of the 20th century, Fort Niobrara had outlived its original purpose. The Sioux were subjugated, and the Army wanted to garrison its troops in new, modern posts near population centers. In February, 1901, the Army announced "temporary" posts which *might* be discontinued. Along with other western posts, Fort Niobrara was on the list.³⁰

However, the next year Fort Niobrara was in a flurry of activity preparing for a large, new garrison. In 1902 the black cavalry and infantry regiments, including the 25th Infantry, were ordered back to the states from the Philippine Islands. In August one company from the 22nd Infantry then comprising the post garrison was replaced by headquarters, band, and the first battalion of the 25th Infantry. Five days later the third battalion arrived. After several years of one company garrisons, Fort Niobrara now had a complement of eight companies, over 800 enlisted men and officers.

A later history of the 25th Infantry characterized the period at Fort Niobrara as "another uneventful period in the history



Key for map of Fort Niobrara, April, 1881, on page 321.

of the regiment, and but little occurred to interrupt the even tenor of garrison life."³¹ With the exception of participating in fall maneuvers at Fort Riley, Kansas, in 1904, and the rifle competition there the next year, the soldiers remained at the post. As was true with other black garrisons in the West, off-duty entertainment was limited in a predominantly white environment. Left to activities of their own design, band concerts, minstrel shows, boxing matches, and dances were main diversions from monotonous garrison duties. Post baseball teams were outstanding and the 25th won the Department of the Missouri championship in 1904. On July 1, 1905, a celebration at the post commemorated the seventh anniversary of the Battle of El Caney and Santiago, Cuba, where the 25th served with distinction. During the period blacks were stationed at Fort Niobrara, relations between soldiers and civilian whites were good, with little of the racial strife and controversy that would later affect the men of the regiment.³²

Although it became increasingly evident the Army was planning to abandon the post, Valentine still had hope for its further expansion. In June, 1904, the secretary of the Interior Department withdrew from settlement several dozen sections of land bordering the military reservation. Many thought the

KEY TO FORT NIOBRARA BUILDINGS

No.	Use	Dimensions			Materials
		Main	Part	Wings	
1.	Comdg. Officer's Quarters	38x49	31x42	16x25	Adobe, wooden roof
2.	Officers Quarters	26x38	17x42	16x25	Adobe, wooden roof
3.	Infantry Barracks	40x100	30x60		Adobe, wooden roof
4.	Cavalry Barracks	40x120	30x70		Adobe, wooden roof
5.	Hospital	70x155			Pine lumber, iron roof
6.	Laundry & Dead House	17x47			
7.	Adjutant's Office, etc.	46x90	36x64		Brick
8.	Commissary Store House	30x100			Adobe, iron roof
9.	Bakery	30x35			
10.	Quartermaster Store House	30x120			Oak lumber, iron roof
11.	Carpenter Shop	20x40			Oak lumber, wooden roof
12.	Blacksmith Shop	20x40			Oak lumber, wooden roof
13.	Cavalry Stables	30x200			Pine lumber, wooden roof
14.	Sinks	15x20			
15.	Dam and Reservoir				
16.	Windmill and Tank	14x20			
17.	Post Trader's Store	26x55			Hewn logs, wooden roof
18.	Post Trader's Saloon	30x46	20x26		Hewn logs, wooden roof
19.	Guard House	40x42			Adobe, iron roof

Foundations of buildings are of silicious limestone.

A temporary ice house is built north of post on the river.

No. 13 not constructed, horses temporarily sheltered by slab sheds at corrals.

Fences not yet made.

Capacity of tank (14x20) = 32,898 gallons.

Windmill 16 ft. diameter. Halladays patent.

Army was increasing the reservation acreage in order to hold large scale maneuvers such as were being held at Fort Riley. Later that summer Lieutenant General Adna Chaffee, the Army chief of staff, inspected the post, and the citizens hoped he would "make suitable recommendations for its advancement."³³ However, the land withdrawal and Chaffee's visit had no bearing on the continuation of the post.

By 1906 the adobe barracks and officers' quarters were badly deteriorated and needed replacement. Several years earlier building repair requests totaling \$20,000 had been denied by the War Department in line with planned abandonment. With peace having come on the Dakota reservations, most of the surrounding military posts had been phased out, with only Forts Niobrara, Robinson, and Meade still in use. In April troops were sent out on their last detail. Company A was ordered to Fort Washakie, Wyoming, to preserve order when part of the Wind River Reservation was opened for settlement. General Order No. 98 arrived the next month formally announcing the abandonment of Fort Niobrara.

In spite of vigorous protests from local newspapers, on July 28 the soldiers marched out of the post to the Valentine station to board trains that would transport them to new posts. The garrison was assigned to Texas posts: headquarters and band to Fort Bliss, third battalion to Fort McIntosh, and first battalion to Fort Brown. Several hundred Valentine citizens gathered that night at the station and remained with the soldiers until 12:20 a.m. when the trains departed. A small detachment left behind to pack and ship government property had by November completed its task and rejoined the regiment. After 26 years of service Fort Niobrara was abandoned as a military post.

After the soldiers left the post was transferred to the Quartermaster Department. Arrangements were made to sell the surplus buildings and materials at auction on October 20, 1906. Seven of the 75 or so buildings comprising the post (three sets of officers' quarters, administration building, one barracks, and two storage buildings) and reservation lands were retained to be used for quartermaster remount operations. One of the conditions of the sale was that the adobe bricks from the quarters and barracks be removed to a dump site north of the fort, leaving the grounds clean. In a cooperative

effort a group of local ranchers and farmers formed a company to bid on the buildings. As the Cherry County Wrecking Company the group purchased a number of buildings for salvage. By the spring of 1907, most of the surplus buildings and fixtures had been removed. As the post gradually disappeared, a local paper wrote plaintively, "The tearing down of the buildings has greatly disfigured the beauty and picturesque-ness of the fort."³⁴

From 1906 to 1911 as a remount depot, a small number of quartermaster officers and employees supervised the purchase of horses for the cavalry and artillery. After this activity ended 16,000 of the reservation were retained by a conservation-wise federal government to be used as a national game preserve. The remainder of the 55-section reservation was opened for settlement on October 13, 1913.

At this stage of our nation's history, the American bison neared extinction. The federal government was offered six bison, 17 elk, and several deer by J. W. Gilbert of Friend, Nebraska, provided land to be made available to keep them. Transported to Fort Niobrara they served as the nucleus for the wildlife preservation efforts carried on at the old fort site today. Over the years the herds grew, and the refuge area was enlarged to the present 19,123-acre Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge. In the 1930s a small herd of Texas longhorn cattle was brought to the refuge. The original herd at the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge in Oklahoma, provided the foundation stock for the Niobrara herd. Present herd levels are maintained at 225 bison, 275 longhorn cattle, and 40 elk.³⁵

Over the ensuing years most of the remaining buildings at the post have been razed. The only exception is a hay shed built in the 1890s. This building and the scattered foundations and mounds of dirt where the other structures once stood are all that remains of one of the largest—and last—military posts built on the northern plains during the Indian Wars. The post was established in that uncertain period when the Sioux were moved to reservations and Fort Niobrara helped enforce that confinement. Although troops from the post did not participate in the pitched battles often associated with the Indian Wars, their presence helped end that turbulent period and assured Fort Niobrara a place in regional history.

NOTES

1. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 46th Cong. 3rd Session, Ex. Doc. 1, Part 2 (Government Printing Office: Washington, 1880), Vol. 1, Part 2, 55.
2. All information on Fort Niobrara garrisons and troop movements are found in the monthly Post Returns, NARS RG 393, Records of United States Army Commands (Army Posts).
3. *Sidney (Nebraska) Telegraph*, July 17, 1880.
4. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 47th Cong. 1st Session (GPO; Washington, 1881), Vol. 1, "Report of the Quartermaster General," 368.
5. *Sidney Telegraph*, July 17, 1880.
6. Crow Dog was tried in Deadwood, Dakota Territory, found guilty of murder, and sentenced to hang. The US Supreme Court overturned the verdict because the Dakota Court had no jurisdiction in a case of one Indian killing another on reservation lands. Crow Dog was released and returned to the Rosebud. George Hyde, *Spotted Tail's Folk* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1979), 332-335.
7. 1881 plan of Fort Niobrara and 1885 printed description of the post. Cartographic and Architectural Archives, NARS RG 77 (Fortification File).
8. "Historic Sketch of Fort Niobrara, Nebraska," compiled by the Adjutant General's Office, dated March 30, 1931. With the Post Returns.
9. In South Dakota, Fort Hale was abandoned in 1884, Fort Bennett in 1891, and Fort Sully in 1894. Information on military posts mentioned can be found in Francis Prucha, *Guide to Military Posts of the United States* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin: Madison, 1964).
10. *Valentine (Nebraska) Republican*, August 5, 1892.
11. *Valentine (Nebraska) Democratic Blade*, December 1, 1887.
12. Gen. James S. Brisbin, *The Beef Bonanza; or How to Get Rich on the Plains* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1959).
13. Diary of John Anderson, photographer at Fort Niobrara, July 3, 1889. Excerpts of which are found in H. & J. Hamilton, *The Sioux of the Rosebud* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1971), 48.
14. *Valentine Reporter*, June 7, 1883.
15. *Valentine Democratic Blade*, May 24, 1888; Fort Niobrara Post Return, July, 1889.
16. Robert Murray, *Military Posts in the Powder River Country of Wyoming* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1969), 150; Fairfax Downey, *Indian Fighting Army* (Old Army Press: Fort Collins, 1971), 309; Don Rickey, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1966), 105.
17. *Neligh (Nebraska) Republican*, July 2, 1880.
18. Post commanding officer's circular dated January 3, 1883, NARS RG 393.
19. *Valentine Democratic Blade*, August 25, 1887.
20. *Omaha Daily Bee*, June 16, 1888. On June 16, 1889, Trumpeter William Carter, Troop A, was shot and killed by Pvt. William Hand of the same troop, allegedly by accident. Fort Niobrara Post Returns, June, 1889.
21. *Valentine Reporter*, July 5, 1883.
22. *Valentine Democratic Blade*, December 29, 1887.
23. Lieutenant W. P. Richardson, "Some Observations Upon the Sioux Campaign of 1890-1891," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, Vol. XVIII, 1896, 519-520.
24. Probably the best interpretation of the events leading to the tragic Wounded Knee affair is Robert Utley's *Last Days of the Sioux Nation* (Yale University Press: New Haven, Connecticut, 1963).
25. *Valentine Republican*, January 9, 1891.
26. *Ibid.*, May 1, 1891.

27. Jack D. Foner, *The United States Soldier Between Two Wars* (Humanities Press: New York, 1970), 129-131.
28. Robert Murray, "The U.S. Army in the Aftermath of the Johnson County Invasion," reprinted in John Carroll (ed.), *The Black Military Experience in the American West* (Liveright: New York, 1971), 443-449.
29. *Valentine Democrat*, September 5, 1901.
30. *Ibid.*, February 13.
31. Captain John Nankivell, *History of the 25th Regiment U.S. Infantry* (1927, reprinted by the Old Army Press: Fort Collins, 1972), 115.
32. In 1906 just after the first battalion was transferred to Fort Brown at Brownsville, Texas, it was involved in what became known as the "Brownsville Affray." After several racial incidents, some of the soldiers allegedly shot up part of the town on the night of August 13, resulting in the death of a civilian and the serious wounding of a police officer. Although it was never conclusively proved who actually fired the shots, the entire first battalion was discharged without honor from the Army. Marvin Fletcher, *The Black Soldier and Officer in the United States Army 1891-1917* (University of Missouri Press: Columbia, 1974), 119-152.
33. *Valentine Democrat*, August 11, 1904.
34. *Valentine Republican*, October 19, 26, 1906; March 1, 1907.
35. Personal correspondence with Kelly Drews, acting refuge manager, Fort Niobrara Wildlife Refuge, January 21, 1983.