



The Guns of Fort Kearny 1848 - 1871

By Frank O. Foote

Fort Kearny on the Platte! To those knowledgeable of the westward expansion of our nation, the name of this military post that had a life of but twenty-three brief years evokes many images.

Fort Kearny was many things to many people—a distant backwater of the Mexican War, where Missouri Volunteers served their time in bored frustration—guardian and supply point of the Oregon Trail—Pony Express and Stage station—briefly the western terminus of the telegraph—home base for a portion of the military forces that protected and made possible the always westward movement of the American Empire. Fort Kearny was all of these, and more. It was even the proposed site (by a few local boosters) of the relocation of our nation's capital! Some persons didn't think small around Fort Kearny.

Fort Kearny saw good times and bad, tension and human drama, but more often the mundane and often monotonous existence of the frontier prevailed.

Fort Kearny existed as an active military post from 1848 to 1871. First named Fort Childs, the post was renamed in honor of Steven Watts Kearny, professional soldier, commander of the Army of the West, and hero, to many, of the Mexican War. This was the Kearny who had led the dragoons and who, in 1846, marched 1,500 men, mostly on foot, from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe in a few short weeks. Kearny took Santa Fe without a shot and went on to California to receive severe lance wounds at the bloody encounter at San Pasqual.

Fort Kearny existed during a time of rapid historic and technological change. During the brief twenty-three years of the existence of Fort Kearny, as we shall see a little later, the standard issue firearms of the U.S. Army rapidly evolved from the smooth-bore flintlock muzzleloader, really little changed from the time of Queen Anne, through the percussion evolvments to breech loading metallic cartridge rifles. Examples of all of these saw service at Fort Kearney.

The site of Fort Kearny was selected because of geographic factors. The Oregon Trail, with its water-based roots at Independence and St. Joseph, trended northwest to the Platte River, where it found over 400 miles of mostly flat terrain, with but a seven foot to the mile upward grade.

Those intimately knowledgeable of the terrain and route of the Oregon Trail can quickly and correctly point out exceptions to the "flat terrain" statement just made. The Ash Hollow descent and the rugged Scotts Bluff detour come quickly to mind, but in the main the statement is correct. The Oregon Trail followed the Platte and North Platte Rivers because it was an easier (not easy, but easier) route west. The Oregon Trail was basically what Fort Kearny was all about!

At the time of the establishment of Fort Kearny there were no railroads on the plains. Steamboat traffic on the Missouri River was the only mechanical transportation. West of the Missouri it was horses, mules, oxen or walk. It was muscle-based transportation, and the few white civilian settlements were a thin, thin scattering along the Missouri River.

Those who know only humid lands must appreciate the importance of water on the Great Plains. Vital today, it was life or death in frontier and pre-frontier periods. You could travel away from water about half as far as you, or your horse or your wagon, could



carry water, and not much farther. Wells were non-existent; springs and ponds few or missing. Only the permanent rivers were a sure water source, winter and summer, wet season or dry. East-west travel on the plains was along rivers; north-south travel followed the "ladder" of generally east-west rivers that started in north Texas and ran to the Dakotas.

The Red and the Washita, the Canadians, Cimmarron and Arkansas, the Smokey Hill, Saline and Solomons, the Republican, the Blue and then the Platte, the Loops, Niobrara—these rivers allowed man to travel north and south on the plains.

A glance at the Nebraska map shows the Platte River making a great sweep southeastward for one hundred miles east of the confluence of the North and South Plattes. The Little Blue River is and was a permanent live stream to within twenty-four miles of the Platte.

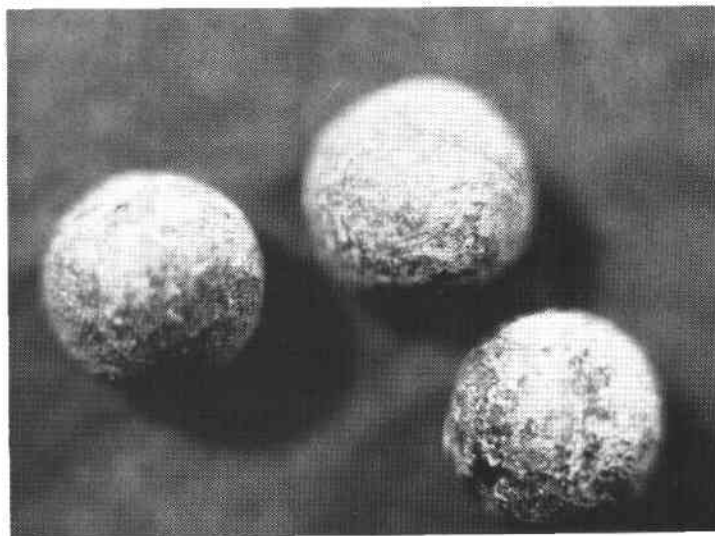
Leaving the Little Blue, the Oregon Trail trended northwestward to the Platte. A very few miles west of the point where the Oregon Trail struck the Platte River at its southernmost point of the Platte's 550 mile reach across Nebraska, Fort Kearny was built. Here was water, wood (found only along stream courses in this portion of the plains), and one of the closest possible accesses to the north-south "ladder of rivers" just described.

It is perhaps difficult for urbanized Americans living in the last fifth of the 20th Century to understand or appreciate the hunger for land and the urge to migrate west that was part of our heritage of the 1840's and 1850's. At that time this country had possessed the long-disputed Oregon Territory for but a few years. Distrust of "Perfidious Albion" and overall British intentions in the Northwest was still rampant. Permanent civilian occupancy in what is now Oregon and Washington was scant. Studies of governmental policies of this period have led to the not unique conclusion that it was official but often unstated national policy to encourage permanent migration to what is now Oregon and Washington. Then, as now, occupancy speaks very plainly. The degree of this governmental encouragement of migration to insure continued United States sovereignty in the Northwest is not now generally realized.

Many of the persons migrating to the Northwest were not well prepared for their task.

Common mistakes included trying to haul too many unneeded

Bullets from Ft. Kearny



possessions, and not enough essential supplies. Too often, wagons were not in a good state of repair for the trip.

As a practical means of encouraging migration to the Northwest, the commanding officer at Fort Kearny was authorized to sell supplies and repairs at cost to members of wagon trains migrating to the Northwest. If satisfied that the travelers could not pay for the supplies, the commanding officer was authorized to convey the supplies for promissory notes, most of which were never collected. Federal aid and subsidies are an older practice than is now commonly recognized.

Travel on the Oregon Trail was indeed under Army control. At various times during the active period of Fort Kearny, the commanding officer thereof utilized his authority to halt the smaller and weaker wagon trains and force them to join other wagon trains to insure adequate man power and protection for the trip west. Then, as now, with government aid went government controls!

Despite such rudimentary governmental help as was given, persons migrating to the West on the Oregon Trail in the 1840's and 1850's had to be mightily inspired. The trip was hard, long and dangerous. Hardship, thirst, exposure, poor diet and disease were frequent companions. Exact figures are lacking, but the best available estimates are that at times one person out of ten who journeyed west was buried along the trail. Despite this, as the 1840's turned into the 1850's, traffic grew.

Fort Kearny also had its relationship with the Mormon Trail. The Mormon Trail started north of Omaha on the Missouri River, struck the Platte about thirty miles west, and followed the Platte River on its north bank.

Then, as now, Mormon activities had organization, discipline, and the common denominator of a single religion, closely followed by a faithful people. The Mormon migration to the Great Salt Lake Valley of Utah was almost a textbook example of how to successfully move large numbers of civilians long distances under primitive conditions with minimal casualties. The Mormons had been tempered by the experiences of oppression and antagonism in Missouri and Illinois. The organization of the Mormon migration was semi-military. Casualties were less because of prior planning and efficient organization. Food plots, especially vegetables, were planted, tended, guarded and harvested by successive groups of Mormon migrants. Because of these food plots there was less scurvy amongst the Mormons. Because there were fewer persons using the Mormon Trail, there was less cholera. Scurvy and cholera were two of the great killers of the western migrations.

Despite any or all of the above conclusions regarding Mormon organization and disciplines, it is this speaker's opinion that the presence of Fort Kearny, and the pacifying influence of the constant patrols that traversed the Mormon Trail as well as the Oregon Trail, had a positive relation on the course of westward Mormon migration.

It is perhaps ironic that Fort Kearny served as a supply point and staging area for the so-called Utah Expedition of 1857. This was the expedition intended to "pacify" the Utah Mormon settlements led by Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston. Less than five years later, with a different rank and in a different uniform, Johnston died of wounds at Shiloh.

The challenge of identifying the firearms used at Fort Kearny has proven interesting. No simple, easy record exists that on such and such a day a certain military unit then stationed at Fort Kearny was entirely armed with such and such a model of firearm. The records, where available, are fragmentary and not conclusive. Recognizing that at times there were both cavalry and infantry units at the fort, and that they often had entirely different firearms, is one complication. Another is the fact that there were both volunteer and

regular army units from time to time stationed at the fort, again often with different models and even calibers of issue firearms.

With a great number of different models, calibers and ignition systems of firearms used at the fort during the brief period of its existence, and with the lack of written records, a different method of determining what firearms were actually used became necessary.

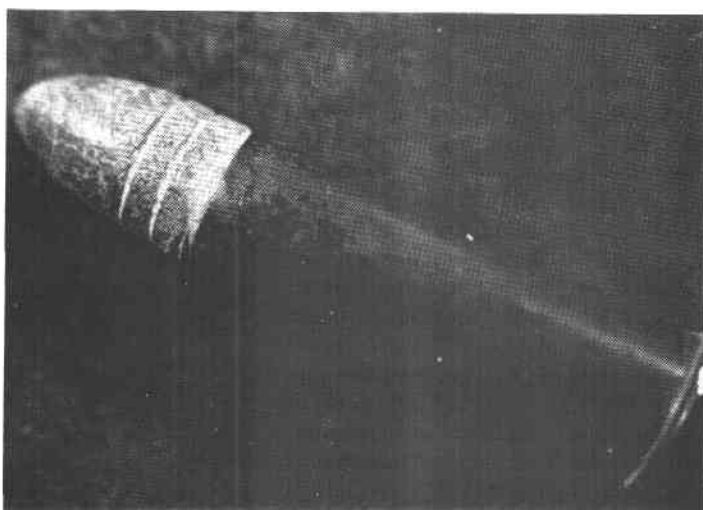
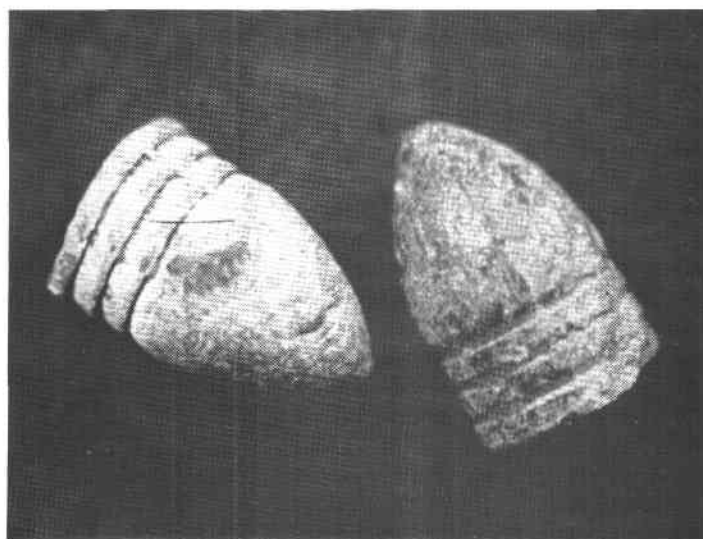
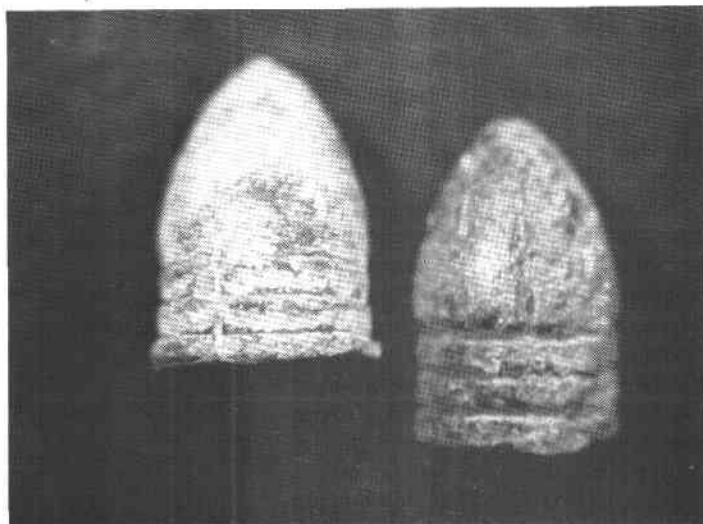
Extensive archaeology has been done at Fort Kearny. Among the artifacts recovered has been a significant number of cast lead bullets. Even with the high water table and fairly alkaline soil of Fort Kearny, these projectiles tended to be very well preserved. Careful measurement of these projectiles, and matching them against the known firearms that were issued during the period of Fort Kearny's existence, has led to some deductions as to the exact models and calibers of firearms used. We are blessed with one good solid inventory in understandable English written by a plain-spoken, hard-bitten professional soldier with the name all here will recognize, John Gibbon. Gibbon served as commanding officer at Fort Kearny from December 4, 1866, to sometime in May of 1867. His superiors had apparently asked for an inventory of arms and ammunition at Fort Kearny, and Gibbon replied, in a letter dated January 2, 1867, as follows: "That there are two pieces of artillery at this post, one of which, a six-pound field gun, belongs to the territory, and it is not on my rations. The other is a twelve-pound Mountain Howitzer, which is in good order and completely equipped with carriage as well as pack saddles for mountain service".

Gibbon went on to inventory artillery ammunition, reporting 42 six-pound solid shot, 42 six-pound spherical case shot, and 14 six-pound canister, which, he added, "may as well remain here as long as the gun does". For the twelve-pound Mountain Howitzer he reported 68 Mountain Howitzer shells, 177 Mountain Howitzer spherical case, and 1800 friction primers to "remain with the piece".

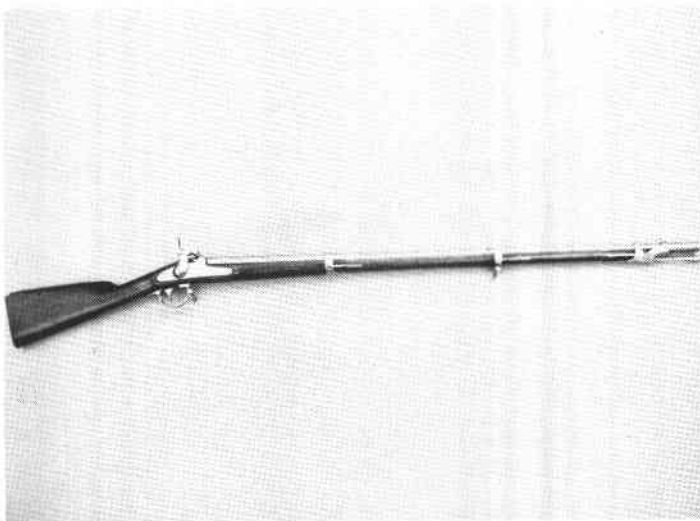
In smallarms, Gibbon reported 706 Springfield rifle muskets, serviceable and fit for issue to troops "passing West". He also reported 81 Enfield rifle muskets, unserviceable, "that should be sent to the nearest arsenal for repairs", and 61 Remington revolvers, serviceable, but "of no use here and had better be sent to some post where they are used by the troops or to an arsenal".

In ammunition, he reported 79,253 "elongated" cartridges, caliber .58, and 1400 "elongated" cartridges, caliber .54, "for issue here or to troops passing". He also reported 64,185 percussion caps, 80,150 Colt Pistol cartridges, caliber .44, and 19,100 Colt Pistol cartridges, caliber .36. His comment on the pistol cartridges was, "most of which may as well be sent to some cavalry post".

When we apply some of the experience and practice of modern times as to the adoption and supplying of military smallarms to the situation as it occurred at Fort Kearny, we can likely make more sense of the types, kinds, models and calibers of firearms found at the post. A modern example is that the M-1 rifle was adopted as the official rifle of the United States Army in 1936, yet we all know that the army was not equipped overnight with M-1s. As late as 1942 there were soldiers who had never seen an M-1. The United States Marines fought the Solomon Island campaign of 1942 largely with bolt-action Springfields. I have reliable testimony from a collector friend in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who will swear on two stacks of Bibles that he and his unit were issued bolt-action Krag and ammunition therefore for guard duty along the beaches of the Pacific in early 1942. The .30 Krag had not been standard issue since 1903, and had been replaced in almost all military units by the Springfields by 1907 or 1908. All of this simply shows that there is a lag time between the dates of official adoption of a new caliber or firearm and the time that these are actually in common and usual use in the field. With the rapid changes and the many models and calibers that occurred in the period 1848 to 1871, we can expect to find almost anything at Fort Kearny.



Guns of Ft. Kearny



Also, this was not a priority post. Particularly during the unpleasantness of 1861 to 1865, that about half my ancestors liked to call the "Glorious War of Southern Independence" and the other half labeled "The War of the Rebellion", Fort Kearny found itself on the short end of a long supply line. During most of that period Fort Kearny was either very thinly held by regular army units, or more often by volunteer units of Nebraska and Iowa cavalry. Towards the end of the unpleasantness of the 1860's Fort Kearny was home base for units called U.S. Volunteers, which was the official G.I. term for units composed of former Confederate prisoners who had volunteered themselves out of the hell of Yankee prison camps into the U.S. Army, and were more commonly known as "Whitewashed Rebs" or "Galvanized Yankees". There were about 6,000 of these troops who saw service on the frontier. At about this time there was one of the rarities of U.S. Army service at Fort Kearny—a Commissioned officer who first served the Confederacy as an officer, then served as a U.S. officer. His name was Beshoar, and full details can be found in a book by his grandson, Baron Beshoar. The book is entitled *Hippocrates In A Red Vest*.

With the priorities in the East, it is not in any way surprising that strictly muzzleloading, percussion, single-shot Springfields and Enfields were the only infantry shoulder weapons on hand as late as 1867 at Fort Kearny.

Units of the 3rd, 5th and 6th regiments of the U.S. Volunteers (Galvanized Yankees) saw service at Fort Kearny in the period 1865-1866. These were not the only unique bodies of troops to serve at the fort. Commencing in 1865 a unique unit, called the "Pawnee Scouts", was recruited from the Pawnee Indian Reservation near Columbus, Nebraska, and used for patrolling, scouting and (later) guardwork along the Union Pacific Railroad. The Pawnee Scouts had white officers, but were primarily the creature of two unique brothers Frank and Luther North of Columbus, Nebraska.

Occasionally rather vague references are found alluding to extensive small arms and ammunition tests being performed at Fort Kearny in the immediate post-Civil War period. If these rumors were true, there should be extensive written records of such tests. To date, investigations that have been performed in the archives of the United States and elsewhere have failed to find conclusive written evidence of such tests. Until such evidence is available, the legend of extensive smallarms and ammunition tests in the Fort Kearny area must remain just that—a legend. This is in the same category as another legend about Fort Kearny that continues to be repeated. The legend is that Robert E. Lee, while an officer in the U.S. Army, was once stationed at, or visited, Fort Kearny. While there were a number of well-known military persons in both the pre- and post-Civil War periods who were stationed at or passed through Fort Kearny, on the basis of present information I must put the Robert E. Lee story in the same legendary category as the smallarms tests. With investigation the story just doesn't hold water. The legend is made that Robert E. Lee left his name and rank in writing on the wall near the fireplace in the officers' quarters at Fort Kearny. The legend even states that Lee left his name there as "Lieutenant Robert Lee". Now Robert E. Lee was a modest man, but even modest military officers are not known to identify themselves at a rank lower than that actually held. Robert E. Lee had long since ceased to be a lieutenant by the time the officers' quarters at Fort Kearny were built in the late 1840's or early 1850's. A close check of Lee's military service record fails to show that he had ever been north or west of Fort Riley, Kansas.

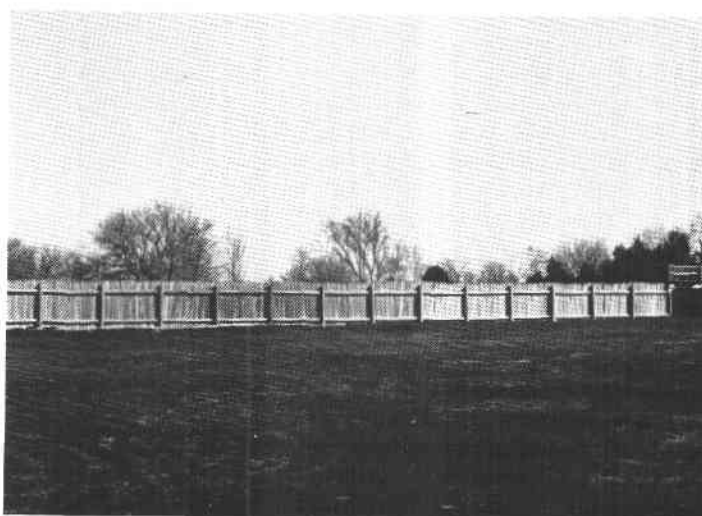
We will later mention some of the more colorful and well known personages who were stationed at or visited Fort Kearny.

From secondary sources we are told that the Missouri Volunteers, who built and first manned Fort Kearny, were armed with

smoothbore flintlock muskets. The standard caliber or bore diameter of the flintlock muskets in service in the United States Army was .69. From archaeological evidence at the post, we find a number of balls that measure on a micrometer from .665 to almost .68. Tolerances were a sometime thing in those days, and even the very slight corrosion to which lead is subject upon long burial can result in a few thousandths variation. Most balls were well undersized to permit loading in fouled bores. We do not know the exact model of the .69 caliber smoothbore musket used by the Missouri Volunteers at Fort Kearny. Given the military situation at the time of the establishment of the fort, there could well have been several models of .69 caliber smooth-bore flintlock muskets in the same military unit. The practice of having several different models of firearms in service in the same small unit occurred and is shown by photographic evidence as late as the Civil War. Older model muskets, such as an 1812 U.S. flintlock musket, .69 caliber, could have been used at Fort Kearny. The number of nominal .69 caliber round balls and gun flints found at the fort is strong evidence of the use of the .69 caliber flintlock at the fort's early period.

The battle of Ash Hollow was the high point of the Sioux Campaign of 1855. The battle was not fought at Ash Hollow, which was a well known resting point and oasis on the Oregon Trail, located some 180 miles west-northwest of Fort Kearny near where Ash Hollow Creek debouches into the North Platte River Valley. While the battle was named for Ash Hollow, it was actually fought on Blue Water Creek, some ten miles northwest of Ash Hollow, and was a running scattered fight extending some three or four miles along the creek valley. The battle was fought under the leadership of General William S. Harney against the Brule Sioux Indians, and was the culmination of a punitive expedition formed to punish the Brules for the Gratton Massacre of 1854. From Fort Kearny five companies of the 6th Infantry under the command of Major Albermarle Cady joined the Harney Expedition and fought at Ash Hollow in what was the largest battle between Indian and U.S. troops in what is now the State of Nebraska. From diaries of the troops involved at Ash Hollow we learn that they were armed with what they chose to call "the new rifle". With a modest amount of deductive reasoning, and using the simple process of elimination, we will state with reasonable certainty that this "new rifle" was the model 1841 U.S. Percussion Rifle, made at Harper's Ferry Armory and by contractors. Flayderman's reference gives the dates of manufacture of this rifle as 1846 to 1855, with a total contract production of 45,000 and a Harper's Ferry production of over 25,000. William B. Edwards, in his work on Civil War guns, describes in some detail a series of tests held at Harper's Ferry in the winter of 1853-54 leading to the development of the so-called "hollow base Minie ball" in this country. These tests were conducted by then Colonel Benjamin Huger and assistant master armorer James H. Perkins. Edwards, in describing these tests, tells of the efforts to develop a modified Minie ball for the 1841 rifle. This leads us to the assumption that round balls were used in the issue ammunition for the 1841 .54 caliber rifle before that time. The archaeology done at Fort Kearny adds evidence to that assumption. These round balls miked out to be nominal .54 caliber, again all undersized. Overall there has been a reasonable number of ".54 caliber" round balls found at Fort Kearny. My studies fail to indicate other .54 caliber smallarms in use in this period on the plains. Late summer of 1855 is too early for the .54 caliber Rifled Carbine made at Springfield in 1855-1856 to have been distributed and issued. The diaries from Ash hollow were from infantry, not cavalry. This also tends to rule out the carbine. Flayderman's *Guide to Antique American Firearms* states that production of the 1855 model .58 caliber Rifle Muskets and Rifles commenced in 1857. I therefore believe that the "new rifle" alluded

Ft. Kearny Today



but particularly in the West. Europe was scoured for second and third quality "surplus" muskets, many of which were also .69 caliber. These were purchased at virtually any price and rushed to America, both South and North.

The work of converting smoothbores to rifle muskets commenced as early as 1856 at both Springfield and Harper's Ferry. Some of the .69 caliber rifle muskets found their way to Fort Kearny, as a fair number of Minie projectiles that measure out a nominal .69 were found in the archaeological work done there by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Again, as two .69 caliber balls show, the micrometer tells us some interesting tales. Tolerances varied from .660 to .679 in what were nominal .69 caliber Minie balls. Not all projectiles found at Fort Kearny were lead, as iron balls measuring out about 1- $\frac{3}{8}$ inches in diameter show. Please recall Colonel Gibbon's inventory for the good number of artillery shells stored at Fort Kearny.

The .50-70 cartridge was adapted as an inside primed non-reloadable centerfire in 1866 for the Allin conversion of the 1863 percussion rifle muskets. This was superceded by the 1868 all new .50-70 Trapdoor Springfield, based again on the Allin work. Again, the phenomena of lag-time shows forth, as we saw in the Gibbon inventory. There were no .50-70s, or indeed .50s of any kind, or even .58 rimfires at Fort Kearny in early 1867. Sometime during the period 1867 to 1871, before Fort Kearny ceased to exist as an active military post, the .50-70 was used at the fort, as we found such a cartridge in the archaeological artifacts. The ruler, the micrometer and the figures available from George Nonte's cartridge references tell us that this cartridge is indeed a .50-70. We have, therefore, evidence from the artifacts found underground at Fort Kearny that U.S. smallarms ranging from .69 caliber smoothbore flintlocks to .50-70 breechloading cartridge rifles saw service at this frontier post.

Ancillary to studies of Fort Kearny, one cannot help but be impressed with the number of well-known persons of our history who served at or traveled through Fort Kearny as part of their duties. Albert Sidney Johnston and John Gibbon have already mentioned.

Serving as Post Commander in 1849 was Benjamin Bonneville, one of the more interesting, and sometimes mysterious, soldiers of the pre-Civil War era.

Captain Alfred Sully, who later cut a wide swath as an Indian fighter in the Dakotas, was Post Commander at Fort Kearny twice in 1860.

First Lieutenant Henry Heth commanded Fort Kearny for almost a full year in 1854 and 1855. Heth later wore three stars for the Confederacy.

Colonel Henry B. Carrington, who earned fame but no glory in later Indian events, commanded Fort Kearny in 1865 and 1866.

Arthur MacArthur, Jr. as a young captain commanded Fort Kearny briefly in 1866 when he was with the 36th Infantry. MacArthur started his army career as a volunteer in Wisconsin in 1862 and retired as a Lieutenant General in 1909. Arthur MacArthur followed Otis as commander of the effort to pacify the Philippines in the early 1900s and, like his son Douglas, earned a Congressional Medal of Honor.

"Cump" Sherman visited and inspected Fort Kearny and served time at the post in the Civil War period.

Phillip St. George Cooke saw Fort Kearny, as did his son-in-law, a gentleman by the name of James Ewell Brown Stuart.

Bill Cody freighted and rode Pony Express out of Fort Kearny. James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickock pursued deserters and horse thieves between visits to the fort in the period 1866-1869.

In studying this period, one is continually reminded of the number of close family relationships in the pre- and post-Civil War. I do not charge that the Army was inbred or rife with nepotism. I

simply state that the number of close family relationships is striking.

Fort Kearny today is a developed State Historic Park, owned and operated by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. It is located on a paved loop off of Interstate Highway 80, east and south of the city of Kearney, Nebraska. The spelling of the name of the city, and of "Fort Kearny" is correct. Fort Kearny State Historical Park has a full-time staff and a modern visitor-interpretive center open during the summer months. A representation of a temporary stockade that was hastily constructed during the Indian troubles of 1864 surrounds a two-acre portion of the fort. Like most western forts, Fort Kearny was not a stockaded post, but this temporary defensive structure was built at a time of great turmoil and trouble, the Indian uprising of 1864. The stockade was originally built on top of a broad dirt base, and when rebuilt in the early 1960s as an interpretive device for the fort a number of the original post holes were found in the construction process, refuting the statement by some that there was never a stockade at Fort Kearny.

Cottonwoods planted in the early days of the fort still exist around the parade ground area. As these cottonwoods die of old age they are being replaced by small trees grown from cuttings taken from the original trees. The staff and management at Fort Kearny has an attitude of what I like to call "authentegrity" for the future of the minor historic jewel that has been intrusted to their care. Even the replica two-piece flag pole was carefully constructed from early photographs. The simulated sod of the rebuilt Blacksmith-Carpenter shop was made from the dirt of the original sod walls.

The guns of Fort Kearny. Because of the paucity of written records, we can tell little about them, except by deductive methods. Additional archaeology will be done at Fort Kearny in the future. As the results and artifacts of these future archaeological endeavors become available, students can know more of the firearms used at Fort Kearny during its period of active service.

The staff, superintendent and management of Fort Kearny have asked me to extend a personal, cordial and standing invitation to the members of the American Society of Arms Collectors and their friends and families to visit this partially restored post. Fort Kearny is one of four frontier army forts that are a part of the Nebraska State Park System.

Fort Kearny has a special romance. Ghosts and spirits of our heritage and history walk there! Go there, and when it is quiet and if you will listen with a little imagination and sensitivity, you will hear the squeaks and jangles and sounds of those wagon trains rolling West, or the thud of the hooves of Bill Cody's horse as he came in to Fort Kearny at full canter at the end of his run on the Pony Express. It's there at Fort Kearny; go listen for yourself!



For
Benjamin Wentzle
THE
Foreman of Lock Dept.

ORDNANCE MANUAL

A. Few Army

FOR
21st April 1854

THE USE OF THE OFFICERS

OF THE

UNITED STATES ARMY.

To go on Tool Return.

SECOND EDITION.

Washington:

GIDEON & CO., PRINTERS.

1850.