

DRAGOON LIFE IN INDIAN TERRITORY, 1833-1846

*By Carl L. Davis and LeRoy H. Fischer**

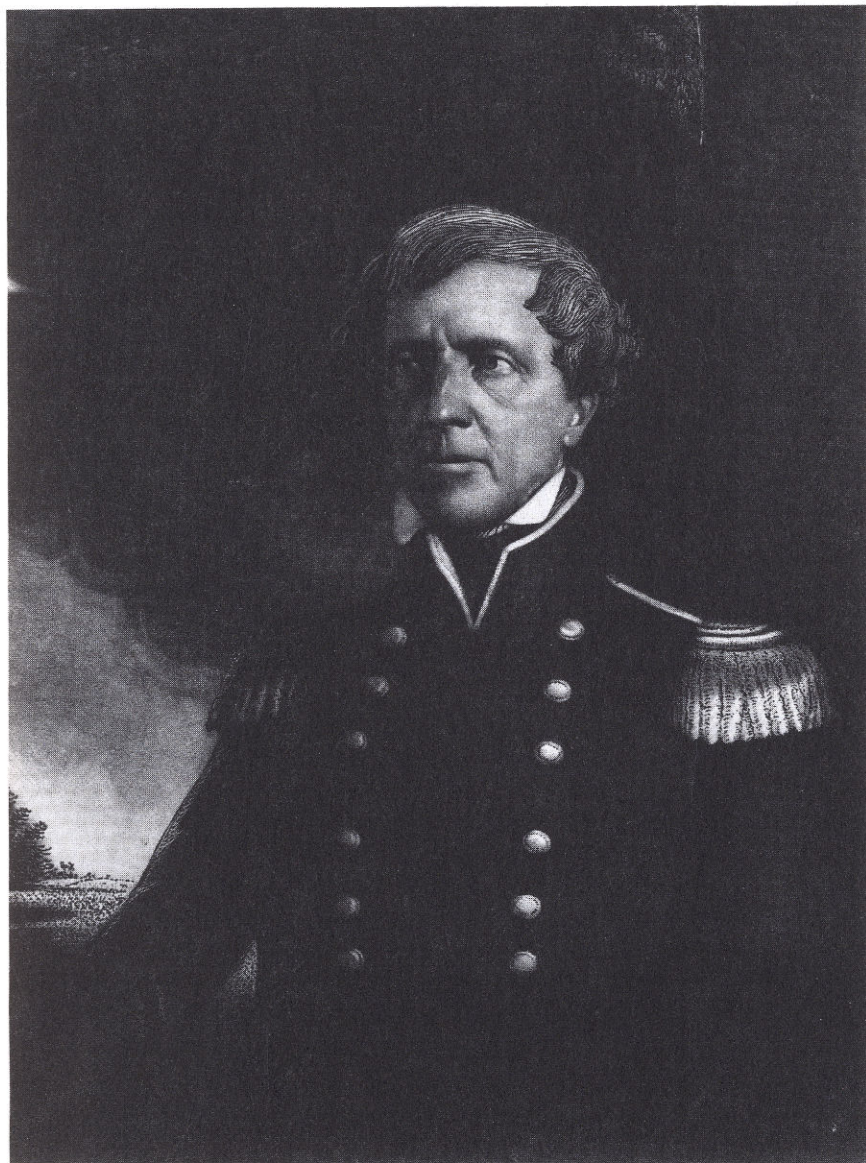
It was a cold December day in 1833 when the column of tired horsemen first sighted Fort Gibson on the east bank of the Grand River. The sight was not impressive to the newly enlisted soldiers. The fort looked like anything except the most important post on the Indian frontier. It appeared to be exactly what it was, an ill-kept, uncomfortable, and undermanned frontier garrison at the edge of the Indian country. The troopers soon learned that even this shabby outpost of American military power had neither space nor quarters for them, and that they would have to establish a camp close by on the river. Tired and without rest, the horse soldiers set about the task of preparing shelter for themselves and their sadly depleted animals. They were the First Regiment of United States Dragoons, sent to do what Washington deemed that the infantry could not: provide the mobility to police the frontier and show the flag in the vast and sprawling American West.

The far-flung nature of the American Indian frontier of the 1830's demanded a departure from the heretofore established military policy. It became clear that infantry, with its limited mobility and range, was no longer sufficient to control the frontier, protect settlers and the Indian wards of the government, and protect the growing trade beyond the settlement line. In late 1831, Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri had introduced his "Mounted Infantry Bill" in Congress and it had become law the following June. This bill created a battalion of six companies to be known as "The United States Mounted Rangers," made up of one-year volunteers who furnished their own arms and mounts. In return, the Rangers were to receive compensation of a dollar a day from the government.¹

Despite Ranger proof of the feasibility of a swift, mounted force, Congress was not altogether satisfied with these "irregulars."

* Carl L. Davis is an Assistant Professor of History at Stephen F. Austin University and a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in history at Oklahoma State University. LeRoy H. Fischer is a Professor of History at Oklahoma State University. The preparation of this article was aided by a grant from the Research Foundation of Oklahoma State University; this assistance is deeply appreciated and gratefully acknowledged by the authors.

¹ A. G. Brackett, *History of the U. S. Cavalry from the Formation of the Government to the 1st of June, 1863* (New York, 1865), p. 34.



(Library of Congress)

STEPHEN W. KEARNY

The first executive officer of the First Dragoon Regiment in Indian Territory,
and its iron disciplinarian.

They were not subject to regular military discipline, and they were, some congressmen complained, too expensive to maintain. For these reasons, augmented by pressure of the old cavalryman Richard Mentor Johnson and his small but determined group of congressmen who had for some time favored the creation of a regular mounted force, Congress passed a bill which President Andrew Jackson signed in March of 1833, creating the First Regiment of United States Dragoons.²

This was to be a large regiment of over 1,800 officers and men, splendidly mounted, uniformed and equipped.³ It soon became clear that this unit was to be the showcase of the army — an elite regiment. Its headquarters were to be at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, which at the time was considered the main mustering area for units moving to the frontier. Colonel Henry Dodge, a splendid old soldier with the habits, manners and tastes of a frontiersman, and an excellent reputation, became the regimental commander. Dodge, however, was known for being somewhat lax in discipline; perhaps for this reason, Lieutenant Colonel Stephens Watts Kearny, a strict disciplinarian, was made second-in-command.⁴

Enlistment for the new regiment moved apace, and instructions to the officers on recruiting duty revealed clearly the elite nature of the Dragoons. Kearny was told to enroll only “healthy, respectable men, native citizens not under twenty and not over thirty-five years of age, whose size, figure and early pursuits may best qualify them for mounted soldiers.” This select regiment was to be national in scope, with its companies drawn from all areas of the country — and sectionally balanced. Congress wanted no accusation of favoritism.⁵

The men who filled the officers’ rolls of the regiment are striking, not only because many of them, such as Edwin V. Sumner, Jefferson Davis, Philip St. George Cooke, and Kearny, would later be famous, but also because many of them represented a type. They were, socially speaking, gentlemen, men who had long objected to walking to battle with their men. They were men who

² Louis Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons in the Mississippi Valley* (Iowa City, 1917), p. 13; *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. IV, p. 652.

³ Otis E. Young, Jr., *The West of Philip St. George Cooke* (New York, 1955), pp. 67-68.

⁴ Louis Pelzer, *Henry Dodge* (Iowa City, 1911), p. 83; Dwight L. Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West* (New York, 1961), p. 56; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 13; Brackett, *History of the U. S. Cavalry*, p. 35.

⁵ Clarke, *Kearny*, p. 56.



(Brady Collection, Library of Congress)

PHILIP St. GEORGE COOKE

A later photograph of the adventurous Virginia aristocrat who as a young man was an officer with the Dragoons in Indian Territory and became a frontiersman in uniform.

wanted to be mounted for social and psychological reasons as well as military. Appointment as an officer of dragoons was sought for its prestige. In the army it was a mark of social distinction.

The exclusive nature of the Dragoons could be seen in their uniforms and equipment, much of which had more pomp than practicality. Their uniforms were dignified, but uncomfortable and difficult to maintain. The jacket was a dark blue, with elaborate cuffs and a light yellow collar embossed at the edges with gold lace. The front of the jacket was studded with twenty gilded buttons distributed in two vertical rows. The trousers were a grayish blue with two broad double stripes down each of the outside seams. In addition, the trousers and jacket were of heavy wool and worn unusually tight. The cap was also elaborate with silver, gilt, and gold braid, topped by a white horsehair plume. The boots were the only concession to comfort, being low cut of a Wellington style, to which brass spurs were attached. Around the Dragoon's waist was an orange sash over which was buckled the sword belt. The undress uniform made only slight concessions to simplicity and none to comfort. To add to the impression of smartness created by the uniforms, the horses of each company were carefully matched in color and size.⁶

The Dragoons were to be equipped with what were considered the best arms available. The sabre was a heavy, broad-bladed affair topped by a basket hilt to give maximum protection to the hand and also to reduce the chances of dropping it in combat. The carbine was of the most advanced type, a breech-loading caplock Hall, the block of which tipped backwards, exposing the front of the chamber for the insertion of the powder and ball paper cartridge.⁷ It could be slung by a strap running diagonally across the chest and hung by means of a ring at the Dragoon's hip. Pistols of a heavy caliber military pattern were, on occasion, issued to enlisted Dragoons; and, of course, pistols were standard equip-

⁶ James Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains, being a History of the Enlistment, Organization and First Campaigns of the Regiment of United States Dragoons; by a Dragoon* (New York, 1836), p. 51; Brackett, *History of the U. S. Cavalry*, p. 51.

⁷ For a description of the Hall carbine, see James E. Hicks, *Notes on United States Ordnance, 1776-1946* (2 vols., Mt. Vernon, N. Y., 1946), Vol. I, pp. 59, 61, 67-69, 72; plates 27, 29, 33, 34, 36, 43; for a history and evaluation of the Hall carbine, see Claud E. Fuller, *The Breech Loader in the Service, 1816-1917* (Topeka, Kan., 1933), preface, p. 17; R. G. Wasson, *The Hall Carbine Affair: A Study in Contemporary Folklore* (New York, 1948) pp. 55-60; James A. Huston, *The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1953* (Washington, 1966), pp. 114-115, 129-130.

ment for their officers, who slung them across the saddle in saddle holsters.

Even in the field or on frontier duty, an attempt was made to maintain an impressive appearance. In 1839, for example, Captain Eustace Trenor, then at Fort Gibson, advertised that the Dragoons needed "thirty sorrels for Company F, twenty-three bays for Company E, forty-five grays for Company C, and fifteen blacks for Company G." Even on this rough frontier post, the Dragoons were required to wear white trousers on all parades and drills.⁸

The newly-enlisted troopers of the Dragoons came by various routes to Jefferson Barracks. Most were transported at least part of the distance by the Mississippi River. For nearly all of these young men — products of a rural America — it was their greatest adventure. They would be the horsemen who would ride the frontiers. Recruiters had told them of their prestige and how they could not even so much as speak to an infantry soldier without lowering their dignity. The Dragoon trooper would be equal, they were told, to any West Point lieutenant of infantry.⁹

For the average Dragoon, the adventure started with success. The passage westward was pleasant and the trip on the mighty "Father of Waters" was particularly enjoyable. At night they camped by the river and, following the evening meal cooked over open fires in front of the army tents, they told tales and sang songs. One song in particular seemed popular with them. It told of the great folk hero, the victor of New Orleans and President of the United States, Andrew Jackson. And so all joined in "The Hunters of Kentucky":

Now Jackson he was wide awake
and was not here to trifle
For well he knew the aim we'd take
with our Kentucky rifles
He marched us down to cyprus swamp
where the ground was low and mucky
There stood John Bull in martial pomp
and here was Old Kentucky.
Old Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky
Old Kentucky, the hunters of Kentucky

"The men were a merry set," wrote a passenger on one of these Dragoon-laden barges, "looking forward to the future

⁸ Grant Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier, 1830-1860* (Norman, Okla., 1933), p. 56.

⁹ Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, p. 45.

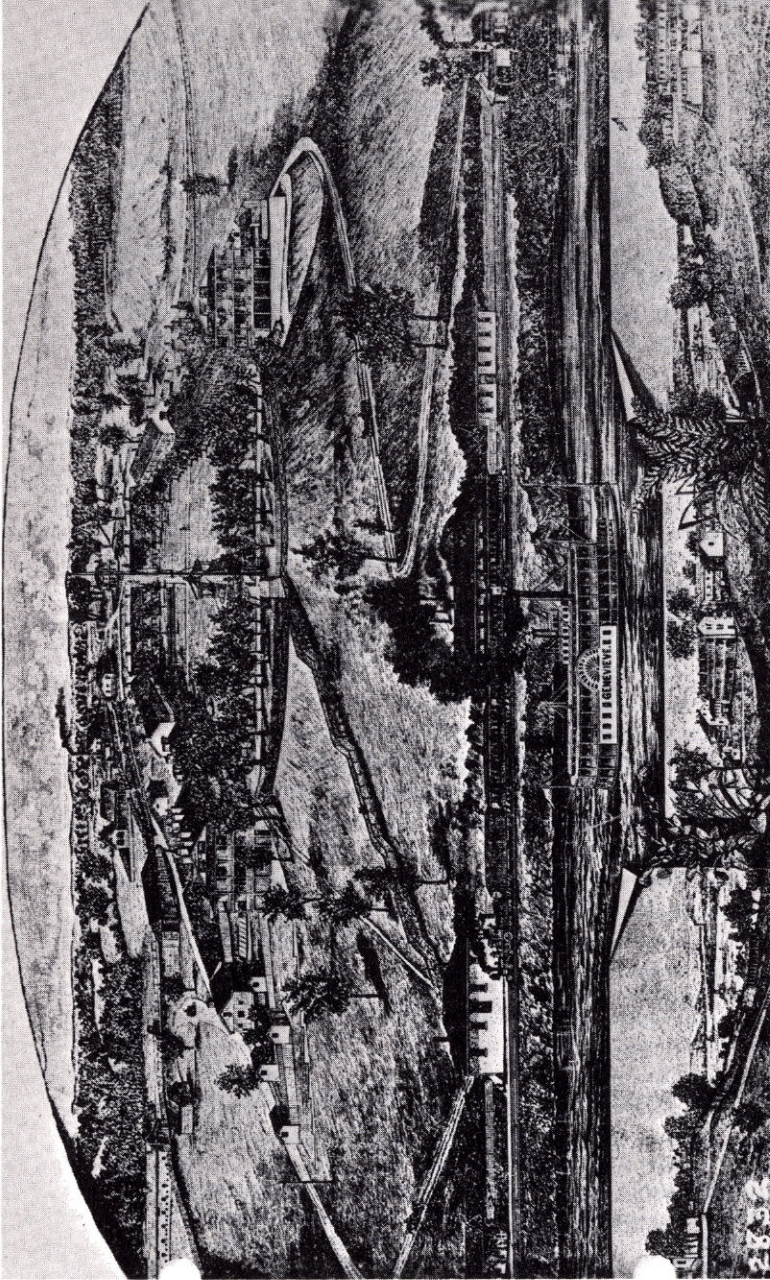
possession of their horses, arms and regimentals with considerable self-complacency; and many a song then echoed through the hoar forests for the first time; some of the most approved became from their frequent repetition almost a nuisance."¹⁰

Eventually companies of Dragoons began to arrive at Jefferson Barracks. This post, located on the Mississippi River about ten miles above St. Louis, was as yet unfinished, despite the fact that construction on it had begun in 1826. Although quarters for the new Dragoons were found, little else was supplied to meet their needs. Horses were scarce, clothing almost nonexistent, and arms and equipment in very short supply. The troopers, who had been told of lavish supplies of all of these things, were ill prepared for the privations facing them. Most had left their extra clothing behind, at their officers' encouragement, when they left for the western post, assuming that they would be resupplied. Winter came and still the Dragoons had no issue of clothing, not even great-coats to protect them from the wind and bitter cold. Arms and ammunition were in such short supply that Colonel Dodge complained that the Dragoons could not take target practice. The troopers began to grumble, and seldom did a day go by without at least one desertion. Corporal punishment increased on the post; courts-martial sat almost constantly.¹¹

At Jefferson Barracks the Dragoons got their first taste of army justice, and throughout their careers they would see a good deal more of it. Army discipline and punishment were harsh, to say the least. Military officers considered five crimes particularly deplorable for a soldier: mutiny, cowardice, desertion, stealing, and drunkenness. Most officers, including major generals Edmund P. Gaines and Winfield Scott, called for the severest punishment for these transgressions, ranging from whipping and branding to execution. "I have never seen one of these vicious idlers whipped," wrote Major General Gaines, "without seeing some positive indication that the operation *intended* as a *punishment* was *felt* as a *punishment*." The guard house was not considered sufficient punishment for the evil doers, who would only "*sleep* under guard." However, the guard houses of the western forts were often so small that the prisoner could neither stand nor lie down; they could hardly be considered places of easy punishment. Often

¹⁰ Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 17.

¹¹ Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 37-38, 44-50, 59; Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 70; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 26.



(National Archives)

JEFFERSON BARRACKS, MISSOURI

The staging base for troops moving to frontier stations. Here the Dragoons received their first taste of army life.

for lesser offenses a prisoner was forced to go about his regular duties carrying a large iron ball chained to his leg.¹²

The Dragoons, neither at full strength nor properly clothed and armed, received orders from the Commanding General of the Army in late 1833, that designated companies were to move to Fort Gibson in Indian Territory. Official Washington was restless because the Dragoons had not taken the field nor proceeded with the duties which they were created to fulfill. Congress had even hinted at abolishing the regiment. Motivated perhaps by political threats, the decision to send the Dragoons was clearly premature. The march to Fort Gibson put the troopers under great hardship: the weather was already turning cold and many of the men still had not been issued greatcoats or even extra blankets in their stead.¹³

It took almost a month to reach Gibson. The fort, which quartered the Seventh Infantry Regiment, was not adequate to house the Dragoons. Their encampment was on a sandbar jutting into the Grand River; someone, undoubtedly with a wry sense of humor, named it Camp Sandy. From here the Dragoons moved to a place only a little over a mile from Fort Gibson, where they began to construct barracks and stables. Here at Camp Jackson, named for the President, the Dragoons would pass the most bitter winter anyone in the area could remember.¹⁴

The barracks were makeshift and constructed flimsily of oak shingles, which offered little protection from the cold, wet weather. Buffalo robes were used to protect equipment and bedding, but at best there was little comfort at Camp Jackson. To make matters worse, the cold weather, reaching twelve degrees below zero, killed the cane and other fodder for the animals and the troopers spent much of their time foraging for their mounts. Supplies of clothing and arms reached them with great difficulty and often after great delay. The river, sometimes with a six-inch covering of ice, was down to such a low level that supply by water became impossible.¹⁵

¹² Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 49-50; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 3.

¹³ Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 73.

¹⁴ Fred S. Perrine and Grant Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans covering the First and Second Campaigns of the United States Dragoon Regiment in 1834 and 1835," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III (September, 1925), pp. 180-181; for a detailed account of the complete journey, see Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 56-75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

The Dragoons soon learned that their prestige offered them no privileged position. They complained bitterly of their tasks, and it seemed to many that they were simply work gangs doing the odious tasks of common laborers. These horse soldiers, who had been led to believe that common labor was beneath their dignity, became for a time not warriors, but "drawers of water and hewers of wood." They also had to dig the wells which supplied water for the troops and animals. Road building was another of their duties, and they contributed their labor to many such projects. Inevitably, once roads and buildings were completed, they were in need of constant repair. During the years which the Dragoons worked in Indian Territory, much of their time was taken up by such tasks.¹⁶

Many soldiers tried to avoid their loathsome tasks, but not always with success. Those who were able to avoid hard work must have served as inspirations for their less fortunate comrades. It was at Fort Gibson that one such ruse occurred. Brigadier General Matthew Arbuckle, commanding the Seventh Infantry Regiment at the fort, had ordered a well dug outside the fort. For this purpose, the officer of the day was instructed to detail two guardhouse prisoners to do the digging. The work went well at first, but because the digging became more difficult in the subsoil, each day's work could be measured in inches. Each day the two prisoners went to their assigned duty of sinking the well. This went on for eighteen months with the prisoners dutifully reporting at the end of the day the progress made. When the officer at the end of the period reported progress of 465 feet nine inches without any water, Brigadier General Arbuckle decided to have the well-digging effort investigated. When the officer arrived in the middle of a work day, he discovered the two prisoners at the bottom of the hole, which was fifteen feet deep, playing cards. The well was never completed.¹⁷

The bitter winter of 1833-34 gave way to an unusually warm spring. The Dragoons were about to face their first summer in Indian Territory, where even the natives were often amazed by the capriciousness of the weather. Not only was there the heat, but as one Dragoon wrote, "This country is remarkable for insects such as snakes, Ticks, & Cattipillars."¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119; Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier*, p. 43.

¹⁷ George A. McCall, *Letters from the Frontiers, written during Thirty Years' Service in the Army of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1868), p. 372; Foreman, *Advancing the Frontier*, p. 44.

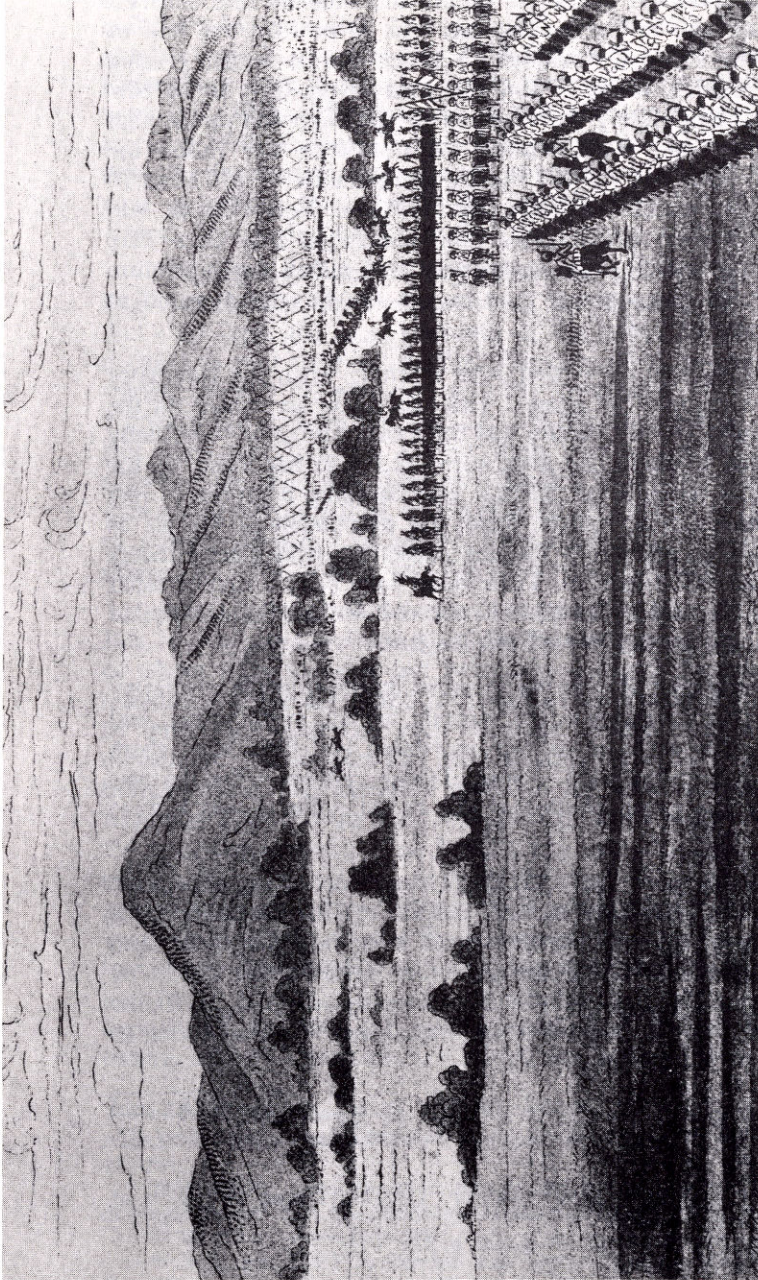
¹⁸ Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 32.

The most important duty of the Dragoons was keeping peace among the various Indian tribes of the area. One of the ways both Congress and the War Department hoped to keep the peace was by a show of strength. True, the Indians had seen United States soldiers before, but the earlier soldiers were infantry who had impressed them very little. To the Indians they were "walk-a-heaps," and walking lent no dignity to a warrior. Although the Dragoons had patrolled and had garrisoned smaller camps in the spring of 1834, the Indians to the west, particularly the Comanches and the Pawnees, had seen very little of this new regiment. During the summer of 1834, the lordly warriors of the plains were to be awed by the glitter and power of United States mounted troops. Five companies, totalling 500 men led by Colonel Dodge and accompanied by Brigadier General Henry Leavenworth, were to take the field. They were to march 250 miles southwest, across the rolling prairies and through the densely-wooded Cross Timbers, 150 miles west of Fort Gibson, and on to the villages of the Comanches and Pawnees.^{18a} Their assignment was to deliver gifts and return abducted Indian children to their tribes in the hope of inducing the chiefs to come to a general peace settlement.¹⁹

For several days prior to departure, Fort Gibson had been alive with civilian visitors ready to accompany the expedition. These visitors, among them George Catlin the artist, were men of some reputation; and while they were undoubtedly known to the officers, it is doubtful that many, if any, of the troopers had ever even heard of them. The men looked forward to the expedition as a great adventure and an escape from dull garrison life. "Our camp," wrote Trooper James Hildreth, "is now, throughout the day, a constant scene of bustle and noise, the blacksmith shops

^{18a} The villages referred to here were those of the *Pawnee Pict* or *Wichita*, located on the North Fork of Red River. An alliance between this tribal group and the Comanche in 1747, was promoted by the French trading relations north of Red River. This close alliance as the years passed brought about the general use of the term *Pawnee* in referring to all the Comanche and their allies up to the time of the Civil War (1861-1865) in the Indian Territory.

¹⁹ Thompson B. Wheelock, *Journal of Colonel Dodge's Expedition from Fort Gibson to the Pawnee Pict Village, 1834*, reprinted in *American State Papers, Military Affairs*, Vol. V, p. 375; George H. Shirk, "Peace on the Plains," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. XXVIII (Spring, 1950), pp. 2-41, gives the complete Wheelock journal, together with the map of the route and camp sites, annotations, and biographical data; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 34; Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, pp. 75-76; Pelzer, *Henry Dodge*, p. 91; Carolyn Thomas Foreman, *The Cross Timbers* (Muskogee, Okla., 1947), pp. 5-7.



(George Catlin's *North American Indians*)

THE FIRST DRAGOONS MEETING FRIENDLY COMANCHES
George Catlin, the famous painter of the frontier, accompanied the 1834 expedition on which this scene occurred.

are kept in continual operation, tailors and saddlers find constant employment, and in fact no one has time to be idle; one half of the regiment are daily detailed to watch horses whilst grazing upon the prairies, which is now the most severe duty to be performed, standing during the whole of the day exposed to the heat of a broiling sun, which during the last week has raised the mercury to from 103° to 107° in the thermometer."²⁰ On June 10 General Leavenworth reviewed the troops at Fort Gibson, was pleased with their performance, and concluded that they were ready for the march. The restlessness and search for adventure which had led many young men to join the Dragoons would at last be rewarded.²¹

It was already warm that June morning when the trumpeter called the Dragoons "to horse." The expedition assembled on the parade ground at Fort Gibson was the most impressive view many of the young troopers had even seen. The men had been up for several hours tending the animals and checking equipment. Just prior to the order to march, there was excitement in the air as officers rode up and down the line conferring with other officers and with the first sergeants. There must have been a sigh of relief when at last the order was given to march and the soldiers wheeled to column and moved away from the fort.

The campaign of over two months' duration in the sweltering heat of Indian Territory would severely tax the men, horses, and equipment. The members of the expedition had little idea where they were going, and even Colonel Dodge confessed that he was not sure of the exact location of the Indian villages which were his objectives.²²

Good time was made during the early part of the expedition and the whole command seemed, despite the hot weather, to be in high spirits. Officers boyishly raced their horses against each other and chased wild buffalo and other game to test the metal of their animals. Occasionally Indians were sighted, and the Indian scouts who had accompanied the expedition were sent out to exchange communications.²³

As the country flattened out into broad rolling plains and as the heat of July intensified, the command began to suffer. Ill-

²⁰ Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 119-121; Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 76.

²¹ Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 33.

²² Pelzer, *Henry Dodge*, p. 95.

²³ Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 75.

ness and heat took their toll. On the first of July three officers and forty-five troopers were reported on the sick list, and the number steadily grew. On July 4 the Dragoons crossed the Washita River; once over, it was decided to reorganize the much depleted command. About 200 men, almost half of them ill, were left there in camp while Colonel Dodge chose about 250 men to push on. After having issued eighty rounds of carbine ammunition and ten days of rations for a twenty-day march, they left the baggage wagons behind and set out to find the Pawnee village.²⁴

On July 14, Colonel Dodge conferred with some Comanches who had entered the Dragoon camp for tobacco. He concluded that they were the most powerful of the tribes in the area and decided to visit their village first. No one could be sure how the soldiers would be received, and the command was tense with "officers and men on the alert, as if in the atmosphere of war."²⁵ But when the Dragoons arrived, there was no open sign of hostility and the chief was away on a hunting trip. After waiting more than a day for his return, it was decided to push on to the Toyash or Pawnee village. One of the Comanches who had been there offered to guide Dodge, and the offer was gratefully accepted.²⁶

Heat, illness, and desertion continued to take their toll. On July 19, the command was again divided and seventy-five men, half of whom were ill, were left behind in a camp. Baggage for the remainder of the command was reduced to what could be carried by three pack horses for each company. Hunger also plagued the expedition. The soldiers had been without bread for a month. The buffalo which had provided much of the meat for the soldiers were now scarce in the area, and although some game was sighted, the troops were moving too fast for any extended hunting. Horse meat became a common part of the troopers' diet. What little game taken was "scanty allowance of provisions for our men . . . [and was] divided among the command with great care." Water was also in short supply and each time the Dragoons thought they had found it, they discovered on arrival that it was only a salt deposit. Of the 500 men who had left Fort Gibson five weeks before, only 183 were left to confront the Pawnees.²⁷

²⁴ Wheelock, *Journal*, pp. 373-374; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 183-184.

²⁵ Wheelock, *Journal*, p. 375; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 188-189.

²⁶ Wheelock, *Journal*, p. 376.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 376-377; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 189-190.

On the next day, July 20, the expedition was within five miles of the village. They received no couriers or any sign of recognition from the Indians; officers and troopers alike believed this to be an ominous sign. The Pawnees may have decided to leave, or worse yet, fight the soldiers. Each trooper checked his carbine to see that the round in the chamber was tight and dry and that a fresh percussion cap was on the nipple as the order came down to "fix bayonets."²⁸

The next morning the command began a cautious move toward the village. After covering about a mile, they were confronted by a band of about sixty Pawnees, who fortunately turned out to be friendly. The Indians, alarmed at the sight of readied arms, begged Colonel Dodge not to fire on them. The Dragoons were then escorted past well-cultivated fields of corn, melons, beans, pumpkins, and squash into a village of about 200 grass lodges.²⁹

The Indians were hospitable and the hungry soldiers received large amounts of fresh food. In addition, the troopers traded them such goods as articles of clothing and knives for more food, presumably to carry back with them. Their hunger on the march was not easily forgotten. The village was not, however, paradise. They were still soldiers with all the duties of soldiers in the field, and arms, equipment, and animals had to be tended. Nor could they completely relax while their officers negotiated with the Indian chiefs, whose numbers drawn from the surrounding area grew daily. The Dragoons were in the midst of potential enemies who greatly outnumbered them.³⁰

At one point in the negotiations a band of heavily armed Kiowas, misinterpreting the soldiers' mission, burst into camp apparently ready to do battle. The soldiers went for their carbines, but cooler temper prevailed. Dodge assuaged the warriors, and the peace talks, now including the Kiowas, continued. At the

²⁸ Wheelock, *Journal*, p. 377.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, p. 192; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 39.

³⁰ Wheelock, *Journal*, 377; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, p. 194; Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 160-161.

³¹ Wheelock, *Journal*, pp. 377-378; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 203-204; Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, p. 171; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, pp. 44-45; Pelzer, *Henry Dodge*, pp. 107-108.

village the officers got at least part of what they wanted, a peace convention at Fort Gibson; and the troopers got what they needed — food, water, and rest.³¹

The return trip to Gibson started on July 25, after Colonel Dodge, because of the conditions of the regiment, abandoned the plan to march to Fort Leavenworth, on the Missouri River 250 miles north of Fort Gibson. The Dragoons faced the same hardships that they had faced on their trip west. Still, from all accounts, the return was less trying. It is probable that the absence of apprehension of the unknown, along with a certain knowledge of where they were going, improved the soldiers' state of mind. Furthermore, the knowledge of the distance between good water and how far it was to the buffalo range and fresh meat allowed the officers to more properly prepare for the return. Even so, the journey was difficult. The men were weak, for nearly all were ill. The horses were sadly depleted with no more than ten, according to Dodge, fit for duty at the end of the trip. Of a command which had numbered about 500 in June, 100 of the Dragoons had lost their lives. Their mission was achieved, but the cost had been exorbitant.³²

In the decade that followed there would be many more Dragoon patrols, explorations, and expeditions. None would be as large nor as disastrous as this one, but all would take their toll. The expedition of Captain Nathan Boone, a son of Daniel Boone, in 1843, is another example of Dragoon activity. Boon and his command mapped the area they explored and brought back mineral samples and other scientific data. It would be accounted a high success, but even so it was plagued by illness, short rations, and the death of two troopers.³³

The Dragoon units stationed on the frontier learned the hard lessons of that life. In time they became frontiersmen with spit and polish, but frontiersmen nonetheless. They learned the skills and ways of the wilderness, sometimes through experience, and sometimes from such skillful frontiersmen as Captain Boone. They learned to construct boats out of the materials available for crossing rivers. They learned to track men and animals, and even deter-

³² Wheelock, *Journal*, pp. 377-382; Perrine and Foreman, eds., "The Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 205-215; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, pp. 40-48; Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 176-182.

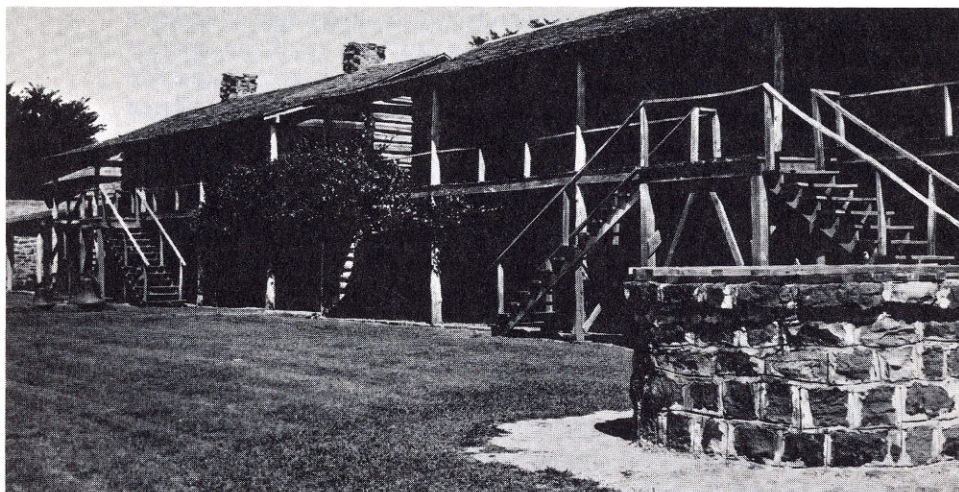
³³ Nathan Boone, *Captain Boone's Journal of an Expedition over the Western Prairies*, reprinted in Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, pp. 181-237.

mine the age of the tracks. They learned to hunt the buffalo, to dry its meat for food, and to use its hide for warmth and comfort. They learned to find water in dry country and even where to dig for it when necessary. They became men who could not only survive but also work in a difficult land.

If these troopers saw the cruelty of nature, with its torrential rains, searing heat and blinding sun, turbulent storms and bitter cold, they also saw its spectacular beauty. They saw the grassy rolling plains, the wooded hills and winding streams, the vast abundance of game and the great herds of buffalo and wild horses. They saw the Indians' strange ways and heard music which fell dissonantly on their ears. They saw the mighty warriors and the great chiefs. They lived a life that stimulated all their senses.

Life could also be incredibly cruel for the Dragoons. They died in great numbers from heat, cold, disease and accidents, and army cruelty. The name "grave yard of the army" passed from fort to fort, and for a time it was used to describe Fort Gibson. Diseases, particularly cholera, at times ran rampant in these western forts. Isolation was the only protection, and this was not always feasible. Accidental death as a result of falls from horses, drowning, and gunshot wounds appear constantly in the journals of the officers and troopers. Moving equipment across rivers and creeks was a particularly hazardous task. For this there was no proper equipment, and even such boats as might have been used could not have been transported with the troops across vast stretches of land. Often lines for towing rafts and boats had to be taken by swimmers across swift and treacherous streams to the opposite bank. Sometimes men were lost in this dangerous task, or later when their flimsy rafts or boats were often capsized.³⁴ Gunshot wounds and deaths were also common. Part of the danger grew out of the mechanical nature of the weapons. Unlike modern pistols and rifles with their internal and manual safety devices, the arms of the nineteenth century had few safety features. In order for a weapon to be ready for action, it not only had to be charged, but a percussion cap had to be on the nipple. When the cap was in place, the hammer had to be positioned in a safety notch or at half cock, both of which only lifted the hammer away from the cap, but did not place a positive block between the hammer and the primer. In addition, the caps were made of notori-

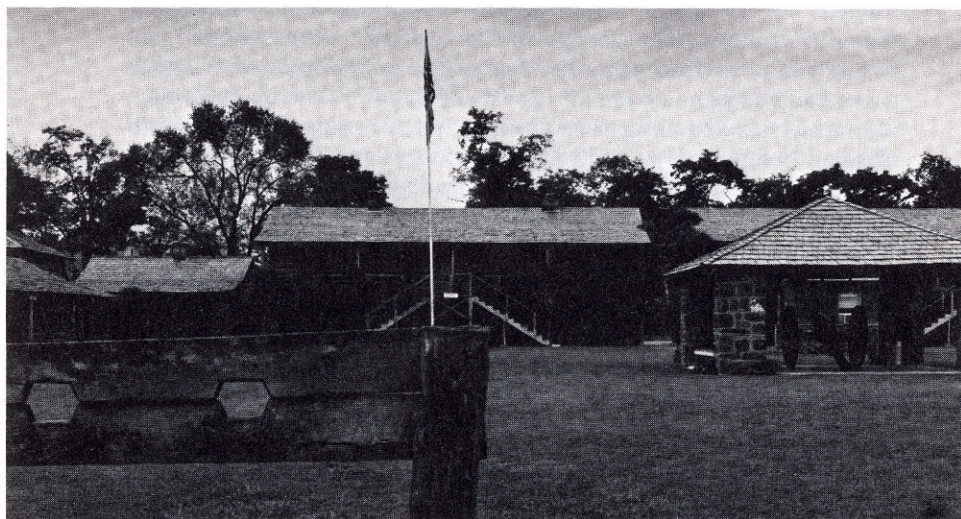
³⁴ See Perrine and Foreman, eds., introduction to the "Journal of Hugh Evans," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. III, pp. 175-177; Boone, *Journal*, pp. 211-212.



(Oklahoma Industrial Development and Park Department)

**FORT GIBSON STOCKADE
INTERIOR**

The restored post showing the well and officers' barracks. Fort Gibson was the main army post and Dragoon headquarters in Indian Territory.



(Oklahoma Industrial Development and Park Department)

**FORT GIBSON STOCKADE
PARADE GROUNDS**

The parade grounds looking toward the restored barracks which housed Dragoon officers and enlisted men. The punishment stocks are in the foreground.

ously unstable chemical compounds which might ignite under a light blow. If the weapon fell or was dropped, or if the notches were worn or the hammer was improperly set, it was susceptible to accidental discharge. Boone's expedition, for example, suffered from three such accidents, resulting in the killing of two troopers and the wounding of one officer. These accidents, whether gunshot wounds, drowning or otherwise, were so common that they were treated almost as natural events. Illness and accident fell far more American troops in the West than the arrows and bullets of the red man.³⁵

Although Dragoon soldiers experienced many frontier adventures consisting of everything from hunting to Indian patrols and major expeditions, combat was rare, and most of their service life was taken up in garrison duties. Post life, whether at Camp Jackson, Fort Gibson, Fort Leavenworth or any of the smaller posts strung across the Indian country, was taken up in hard work and dull routine. The life of soldiers from post to post seems to have differed little. The installations were relatively isolated and social circles were small. The lesser posts were occupied by small units of company strength or less, and partially for this reason the army's social practice developed of not associating with other enlisted men outside the company. Other factors also narrowed the troopers' circle of friends. The army, whether infantry or dragoons, generally marched four abreast. Hence, the soldier's closest friends were usually the members of his "set of four." While on field duty, the army traveled as light as possible, often issuing only one blanket per man, and on cold nights troopers would sleep in pairs by sharing their blankets and rolling up together for warmth. Each man's closest friend was usually his "bunkie." Officers, even on the smaller posts, were generally inaccessible to the troopers, and while they represented an ultimate authority, the most immediate superior was the sergeant. This noncommissioned officer was generally of a tough breed. In fact, toughness was a requirement for a sergeant because he sometimes had to handle his men by force. His authority was great: A private normally could not approach his officer without first having the sergeant's permission.

Daily activity on a frontier army post began early, usually at or before the first trace of light in the eastern sky. After roll call, the first duty of a Dragoon unit was to tend the horses and clean the stables. Then came breakfast at about 7:00 a.m. Constant

³⁵ For examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 187, 209, 223, 234; Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 74.

repair of the wooden facilities of the fort was necessary, and the trooper for much of his service life was a carpenter or painter. Foraging duty was also common. This was usually one of the more desirable tasks, since it took the detail outside of the confines of the fort. Trips to towns or to other forts were generally looked forward to, because they offered the trooper a break from the bleak routine and provided a chance to meet other people, exchange news, and hear of the outside world.

The Dragoon spent much time cleaning and tending to his equipment and uniforms. Like all soldiers, his weapon was his "best friend." In the case of the Dragoon, this was primarily his carbine, which in the 1830's and 1840's was a caplock Hall loading at the breech. This weapon was much maligned by Dragoon officers, but it was actually an excellent weapon for mounted troops; in fact, it was at the time the most advanced military weapon in the world. The Hall could be loaded and fired from three to five times faster than could the standard muzzle-loading weapon. Further, because it did not require that the load be rammed the length of the barrel, it was ideal for use on horse back.³⁶

One of the difficulties with the Hall, like the other weapons of the time, resulted in part from the overzealousness of the officers, who required a great deal of cleaning and polishing of weapons. Colonel George Croghan, the army's Inspector General, reported after one of his inspection tours that soldiers cleaned and polished their weapons until they gleamed, but that they polished away the finish, which exposed the bare metal to the elements and weakened the lock work so that they became inoperative. With the Hall, if the face of the breechblock was polished too much, a gap between the chamber and the barrel was created, allowing the hot gases to escape and moisture to seep in. Yet despite officers' protests, there is evidence that troopers familiar with the Hall thought quite highly of it, not the least reason being that the breechblock, which also contained the hammer, could be removed and with a reduced powder charge used as a pocket pistol.³⁷

³⁶ Carl L. Davis, "Army Ordnance and Inertia Toward a Change in Small Arms Through the Civil War," (Master of Arts Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1959), pp. 17-25; Young, *The West of Philip St. George Cooke*, p. 74.

³⁷ Official Report of Colonel George Croghan, Inspector General, October 26, 1836, in Francis Paul Prucha, ed., *Army Life on the Western Frontier* (Norman, Okla., 1958), p. 97; Samuel E. Chamberlain, *My Confessions* (New York, 1956), p. 58.

It was, of course, first priority that weapons be kept in working order, since most of the small frontier posts had only limited reserves of arms and little facility to make more than minor repairs. Swords, bayonets, and pistols likewise came in for their share of care, although none of these items were ever particularly popular for combat use by Dragoon soldiers.

Other items of equipment also required constant attention. Much time was consumed in the upkeep of the Dragoon uniform. Not only did it have to be washed and pressed, but its buttons, lace, and gilt had to be polished or maintained. Leather, which deteriorated rapidly under weather, rough use, and general frontier conditions, was also a constant source of worry. Broken straps, detached stirrups, or cracked saddles could be more than a nuisance; they could be a matter of life or death while the troopers were in the field. Blankets and bedding also had to be mended and kept clean.

Drill was almost a common daily occurrence and full-dress inspections were regular, usually at least once a week. The cantonment grounds had to be kept clean. Water had to be drawn for men and horses and for purposes of cleaning and washing. Wood had to be cut and gathered into the fort; and where wood was in short supply, other fuel, such as buffalo chips, were gathered in its stead. The garrison troops also attended to the fort's garden and supplied at least part of the fort's meat by hunting. Sometimes cattle herds were maintained to furnish part of the meat supply. It was even suggested by one Dragoon officer, Edwin V. Sumner, that extensive acreage be put under cultivation to supply food for the horse, although there is no evidence that this procedure was ever followed to any great extent by frontier garrisons. Horses were often pastured outside the confines of the fort, and men were detailed to tend them. All in all, the day was long and hard; and when the bugle for lights-out sounded at 9:00 p. m., most troopers were ready to go to their bunks, to be rested so they could start all over again the next sunup.³⁸

Life on a frontier post, although limited, was more nearly adequate for Dragoon officers. They brought a great deal of baggage, a good bit of it books. Also significant numbers of officers brought their wives and families with them. Hard as his life often was, an officer might have it softened and comforted by having women and children around him. At post dances he could

³⁸ Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, pp. 169-171.

socialize with his wife or with the wives of other officers. He was often given private quarters. There is no attempt here to say that life for the officer was not harsh, but it should be noted that it was less so than it was for his men.

Isolation and loneliness fell more heavily on Dragoon enlisted men than on their officers. Very few had wives and families on the post, and women companions for unmarried soldiers were scarce. Neither wives nor wholesome female companions were available for enlisted men at Fort Gibson and the smaller and more isolated posts in Indian Territory of the 1830's and 1840's. The lack of these proved a basic handicap, for American society of the period was rural and family centered. The extended family was still the rule rather than the exception. Families were usually large, and the American man was normally surrounded by women — his mother, his sisters, and his cousins. They were an important part of his life, and the loss of them was often devastating.

The possibilities for recreation at Dragoon frontier stations were also limited. Post libraries seldom contained more than half a dozen worn volumes. Music, an important part of American life and entertainment of the period, was such as could be created by the soldier or by the post band, if indeed the post had a band. Americans liked to sing, and soldiers were no exception. They could sing, bet on cards, or drink, and they often did all three at the same time. Footracing, horseracing, and wrestling were as common at military posts as they were in other American communities. But these activities often did not relieve the drudgery, boredom, and loneliness that was the life of the frontier soldier.

Considering this kind of life, it is understandable that drinking became the major problem of the army. In some years liquor accounted for about one-fifth of all deaths at military hospitals. Officers punished over-indulgence, but seldom did anything to alleviate the conditions which encouraged it.³⁹

Thus, it is understandable that about one-fourth to one-third of the enlisted troops deserted or took "leg bail" each year. Officers attributed this to the "low character" of the common soldier, but harsh conditions, severe discipline and punishment, boredom, and loneliness, probably explain this statistic better. The Dragoons suffered less from these problems than other units on the frontier,

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 170, 173; Charles W. Elliott, *Winfield Scott, The Soldier and the Man* (New York, 1937), p. 270.

partially because of a professional core of noncommissioned officers and troopers, but they were still serious.⁴⁰

Although life of the Dragoons in Indian Territory in the years before the Mexican War was hard, it was productive. By 1846, any doubts as to the value of these expensive units were dispelled even in the thoughts of the economy minded Congress of the period. They were, at once, the most respected and the most useful regiments in the army. The Dragoons helped garrison the forts of Indian Territory and kept the peace. They escorted traders, artists, scientists, and other important people across the rolling hills and prairies and through the mountains. They built and repaired roads, keeping open the meager lines of communication. Dragoons helped explore and map the region, and helped accumulate scientific samples of minerals, soils, and woods. Much of what was known about Indian Territory was a result of Dragoon efforts. Many of these achievements were accomplished in the face of the most extreme difficulties. Despite the frequent cruelties of man and nature, the Dragoons performed their duties with credit and prepared the way for a westward marching America. They were the vanguard of a coming civilization; they stood on the frontiers of the Republic; and all things considered, they served that Republic well.

⁴⁰ Robert Utley, *Frontiersman in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York, 1967), p. 18; Pelzer, *Marches of the Dragoons*, p. 20; Hildreth, *Dragoon Campaigns*, pp. 44-46.