

The present location of Fort Riley was originally established in the late fall of 1852 and named Camp Center as it was believed that the location was the geographical center of the United States. (This later proved to be incorrect). On May 17, 1853, Fort Riley was officially established and the Army Appropriation Act of that year authorized \$65,000 for construction of permanent buildings. Fort Riley was officially named by General Order 17 War Department dated June 27 1853 for Major General Bennett Riley.

The permanent buildings were begun under the direction of Major Edmund Ogden in the summer of 1855. A number of the buildings still remain, including the United States Cavalry Museum, which was originally constructed as the hospital. Three sets of Officers' Quarters were built facing what is now Sheridan Avenue. Two of the sets were doubles and one was a single set of quarters. The two double sets are still in use as quarters today. Quarters 21 for a number of years was the Cavalry Officers' Club and in 1927 again reverted to quarters. Quarters 24 has been in continuous use as Officers' Quarters for over 112 years. The single set of quarters built in 1855 was located where Forsyth Avenue joins Sheridan Avenue and has since been demolished.

Other buildings constructed during this period were the Chaplain's Quarters, now located across K18, and St. Mary's Chapel. One can observe that the local stone used in construction of all of these buildings in this period was smooth on the outside surface in contrast to the buildings which were constructed in the latter part of the 19th Century at Fort Riley.

Quarters 24 was originally constructed as a 3-bedroom unit at a cost of \$3,500. It is believed that these were changed to 2-bedroom units when the baths were installed in the second floor, probably about 1896. Clearly, too, the basement excavations were done sometime after the original construction.

It is not clear from the plans now available whether the kitchens were built as separate buildings and later connected or were connected at the time of the original construction. In any event, it can be seen that the area-way between the dining room and kitchen has been covered and that originally these were outside walls.

The most famous inhabitant of Quarters 24A was Lieutenant Colonel and Mrs. George A. Custer. Lieutenant Colonel Custer, a brevet Major General from the Civil War, was ordered to Fort Riley in the fall of 1866. He and his wife, Elizabeth, are believed to have lived in these quarters during the time that General Custer was commanding the 7th Cavalry.

Mrs. Custer in her book, "Tenting on the Plains," discusses their life in Kansas as the "happiest days of their lives."

The Custers arrived on 3 November 1866 and had taken the railroad to within 10 miles of Fort Riley. On the date of their arrival, General Sherman was on an inspection tour at Fort Riley and the occasion was a gala one.

Mrs. Custer wrote of seeing Fort Riley for the first time, "It was my first view of a frontier post. I had either been afraid to confess my ignorance or so assured there was but one variety of fort and the subject needed no investigation, that Fort Riley came upon me as a great surprise. I supposed, of course, it would be exactly like Fortress Monroe, with stone walls, turrets

for the sentinels, and a deep moat. I could scarcely believe that the buildings, a story and a half high, placed around a parade ground, was all there was of Fort Riley. The Settlers' Store, the Quartermaster and Commissary Storehouses and the stables for the Cavalry horses were outside the square near the Post and that was all. No trees and hardly any signs of vegetation, except the buffalo grass that curled its sweet blades close to the ground as if to protect the nourishment it had from the blazing sun."

General Custer himself was delighted with what he beheld, and he particularly loved the haze that covered the land with a faint purple light and is quoted as saying, "Now, I begin to realize what all that transparent veil of faint color means in Bierstadt's paintings of the Rocky Mountains in the West."

The Custers moved into the double house with few articles of furniture. They had but six wooden chairs and later, when the railroad was completed, Mrs. Custer had a party of 150 excursionists arrive at her home for shelter. She was able to seat only 7 people though, for one traveler sat on a trunk. The party looked significantly at the larger rooms of the house until Mrs. Custer confessed that she had no more furniture hidden away. Their quarters had no sink and no closets. The water was hard and drawn from a barrel that stood by the kitchen door.

The Custers were particularly happy at Fort Riley for they both loved to ride and found the prairies ideal for the riding they enjoyed. Mrs. Custer says in her book, "It's beyond my pen to describe the wild sense of freedom that takes possession of one in the first buoyant knowledge that no impediment seemingly lies between you and the setting sun. After one has ridden over conventional highways, the beaten path marked out by fences, hedges, bridges, et cetera, it's simply an impossibility to describe how the blood pounds in the veins of the freedom of an illimitable sea."

Mrs. Custer notes in her book that she was the only wife in the regiment who stayed continually in the West. She apparently led the social life of the area. And, in view of the mission of the 7th Cavalry, to protect the railroad, their life was one of partings and Mrs. Custer speaks of loneliness and cold and watching from the "gallery windows" for the return of the General.

The Custers missed the social life of the East and found enjoyment in parties and reading. General Custer's brother, Captain Tom Custer was also in the regiment and was well-known in Junction City and Ogden. Mrs. Custer particularly missed fine clothes of which she was most fond, as was General Custer, and on one trip to Washington to take an examination required of all officers, he returned with a trunkload of clothes for her.

One of the tragedies of the Custer story is his court-martial which resulted in part from his long ride across Kansas to return to Mrs. Custer when he heard a rumor that cholera had broken out at Fort Riley. He left Wallace with a small group, leaving his main body behind and rode to the nearest rail point where he entrained for Fort Riley. The events which took place on this ride, plus his departure from his command without authority, were the basis of court-martial charges preferred against him. He was tried at Fort Leavenworth and found guilty. It was only through the intervention of General Sheridan that he was returned to duty and rejoined the 7th Cavalry.

The rest of the story of General Custer, which ended at Little Big Horn in June of 1876, is well-known.

NOTE: This material was taken from an article in the Junction City Republic of 25 June 1953, written by Mona Kessinger, and from the archives of the Post Engineer at Fort Riley.