

On Duty at Fort Ridgely, Minnesota: 1853-1867

PAUL L. HEDREN

Fort Ridgely, Minnesota, rests securely in the annals of western American history because of the very significant role it played in the tragic 1862 Sioux Uprising. During the autumn of that year it provided protection for hundreds of homeless and stricken civilians. The post was actually besieged by hostile Indians on several occasions—an act not as common to history as it is to television and movies! And the fort served as a major focal point for the military operations that finally quelled the Central-Minnesota hostilities.

Contrary to most studies on the subject, however, a look at Fort Ridgely should be more than just an examination of the events of 1862.¹ An encompassing study of this interesting post should look at the art of soldiering in the Upper Midwest, with all its associated ills and blessings. A study should look at the relationships between the military and civilians at this fort. An investigation of Fort Ridgely should answer numerous questions. Just who served there? Who led those men? How did they dress? What did they accomplish? Ridgely was a vibrant fort, and it does have an interesting history—beyond the year 1862.

The need for a military post on the Upper Minnesota River was quickly recognized and urged following the signing in 1851 of treaties with Minnesota bands of Sioux Indians. It was argued that troops should be better positioned to operate offensively

1. The standard approach to Fort Ridgely history has been to briefly examine the construction and use of the post, preparatory to lengthy discussions of the Sioux attacks in 1862. Such studies as Kenneth Carley's *The Sioux Uprising of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1961), C. M. Oehler's *The Great Sioux Uprising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), and the Minnesota Historical Society's *Fort Ridgely: A Journal of the Past* (St. Paul, n.d.), among others, follow this mode. There is still no comprehensive post history.

against any Indian aggressions.² Citizens felt that the existing forts, Snelling, founded in 1819, and Ripley, established in 1849, were located too far away to provide quick protection for southern Minnesota's ever growing number of settlers. Bowing to such pressures, the War Department in Washington finally authorized the development of a new military post on the Minnesota River, near the Sioux Reservation.

This new fort was formally established on 29 April 1853, by Companies C and K, Sixth Infantry, from Fort Snelling.³ The site, chosen by surveyors about half a year earlier, was on the north bluff of the Minnesota River, near the junction of that stream and the Rock River. The location met the usual military requirements considered in site selection, which included available potable water, adequate forage for the animals, abundant building materials and fuel, and a sufficient tract of level land for the parade ground and buildings.⁴

The new Fort Ridgely more than adequately met the required standards. Good water could easily be obtained from the two rivers and also from a spring located at the bluff just to the south of the fort grounds. The fort's position on the rich tall-grass prairie land precluded problems of securing forage. Adequate supplies of building materials and fuel could be found on the Minnesota River bottomland, and there was sufficient flat land on the bluff for development. Since Fort Ridgely stood near the approximate head of navigation on the Minnesota River, the two companies of infantry from Fort Snelling arrived at the site by riverboat. Soon after they arrived, they were joined by Company E, also of the Sixth Infantry, from Fort Dodge, Iowa, a post then being abandoned. These three companies, numbering 144 officers and men, proceeded with the construction of the post. To assist them, they were aided by a number of civilian craftsmen and laborers from Saint Paul.⁵

The fort being erected was first referred to in the army

2. Kenneth L. Walsh, "A Biography of a Frontier Outpost: Fort Ridgely" (Master's thesis, University of Minnesota, Duluth, 1957), p. 5.

3. Francis P. Prucha, *A Guide to the Military Posts of the United States, 1789-1895* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1964), p. 102.

4. Ray H. Mattison, *The Army Post on the Northern Plains, 1865-1885* (Gering, Nebr.: Oregon Trail Museum Assn., 1962), pp. 3-4.

5. Francis P. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 166.

records as the "New Post on the Upper Minnesota River." An order dated 27 June 1853 officially changed the title to Fort Ridgely.⁶ The name was given in honor of three Maryland brothers who had perished during the Mexican War. They were First Lieutenant Henderson Ridgely, Fourth U.S. Artillery; First Lieutenant Randolph Ridgely, Third U.S. Artillery; and Captain Thomas P. Ridgely, Second U.S. Artillery.⁷

The buildings erected by the Sixth Infantry were laid out around a parade ground that measured some ninety yards square. Fronting this parade ground on the north side was the company barracks. This two-story building, designed to house 400 men, was constructed of native granite quarried along the Minnesota River about two miles above the fort.⁸ Originally, the War Department desired that all of Fort Ridgely's buildings be made of the granite. However, it was soft and quickly proved to be unsatisfactory for building material, so by the time the post was completed most of the structures had been built of wood.⁹ Located behind the barracks were a series of log cabins, plus numerous outbuildings. One of these cabins was used as the post hospital; the rest served as homes for noncommissioned officers, married enlisted men, and laundresses.

An 1862 sketch map of the fort shows five wooden buildings on the east side of the parade ground. In the center was the post bakery. Flanking it on the north and south were sets of officer quarters. About one hundred yards east, behind these buildings, was the fort's small cemetery. Fronting the south side of the parade was a double quarters. The east half of this building served as headquarters and as living quarters for the post commander. The other half of the structure housed the post medical officer. This building burned to the ground in

6. Walsh, *A Biography of a Frontier Outpost*, p. 13.

7. Robert W. Frazer, *Forts of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 66.

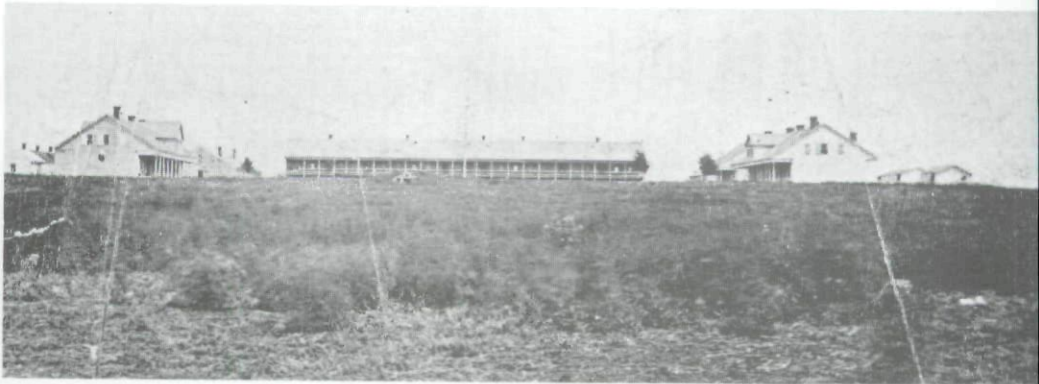
8. Richard H. Coolidge, *Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1856), p. 67 (hereafter cited as *Statistical Report*); June D. Holmquist and Jean A. Brookins, *Minnesota's Major Historic Sites* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1972), p. 134.

9. G. Hubert Smith, "Excavating the Site of Old Fort Ridgely," *Minnesota History* 20 (June, 1939): 151.

Fort Ridgely, Minnesota 171

January 1865 and was not rebuilt.¹⁰ Also positioned on the south side, and almost to the bluff, was a large stable. During the siege in 1862, this building was occupied by attacking Sioux. To remove the Indians, artillery batteries in the garrison fired upon the building and destroyed it.

The majority of the fort's complex stood on the west end of the grounds. Fronting the parade and adjacent to the barracks



Fort Ridgely after 1865. This photograph, taken from the south looking north, is the only one of the fort known to exist. The small mound of rubble in front of the long building may be the remains of the headquarters building that burned in January 1865.

was a granite commissary storehouse. As with the barracks, the stone used in the commissary was quarried along the Minnesota River.¹¹ This structure is one of two that remain at Fort Ridgely today. South of the storehouse was another officer quarters, and located between those two buildings and to the rear, was the post guardhouse. About two hundred yards to the northwest of the parade ground were two log magazines. They were detached such a great distance because stored inside were kegs of cannon and musket powder, fixed ammunition, and various weapons. After Fort Ridgely was abandoned, one of these log magazines was moved intact to a nearby farm. It has

10. Ibid.

11. Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, p. 67.

172 *South Dakota History*

since been returned to the fort site and exists as the second of the two remaining buildings.

Directly west of the parade about two hundred feet was the sutler's store. The post sutler was a very important civilian at all of the forts. Sutler appointments were made by the secretary of War. They were granted the exclusive privilege of trading at the forts and were authorized to sell food, clothing, personal items, and anything else deemed necessary or proper by the individual post commanders.¹² Considering that the nearest other stores were at New Ulm, some twenty miles down river, it is easy to understand why this was a lucrative appointment. To the southwest of the store was the sutler's home and warehouse. Also in this general area were numerous outbuildings, including ice and root cellars, a granary, and Peter Quinn's cabin. Quinn was employed by the army in November 1853, as Fort Ridgely's Sioux interpreter.¹³ He was killed in the action at Redwood Ferry in 1862. His home was burned in one of the Sioux attacks on the fort in that same year and was never rebuilt.

The Fort Ridgely monthly reports, *Post Returns*, indicate that construction at the site was largely completed by April 1855, because in that month the army reduced its civilian work force to three employees. Before that as many as thirty-five civilians had worked on the varied projects, but after April, only a blacksmith, a master carpenter, and an engineer remained.¹⁴ From 1855 on, the appearance of the fort changed very little. As noted, several buildings did burn, especially in 1862, and at least two structures were added after that year, as verified by an 1866 sketch of the post. These structures were the two small grain storehouses, built near the northwest corner of the parade ground.¹⁵ Crowning Fort Ridgely was the flagstaff positioned in the very center of the parade ground. At its top in pleasant weather flew a huge garrison flag that measured some thirty-five feet on the fly by twenty feet on the hoist. A small storm flag,

12. Thomas Wilhelm, *A Military Dictionary and Gazetteer* (Philadelphia: L. R. Hamersly & Co., 1881), pp. 448-49.

13. *Post Returns*, Fort Ridgely, April 1853-April 1867, Records of U.S. Army Commands, Record Group 98, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

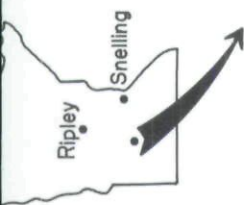
14. *Ibid.*, 1854-1855.

15. This drawing is by First Lieutenant John C. White, 10th U.S. Infantry, *Fort Ridgely: A Journal of the Past*, p. 6.

FORT RIDGELY

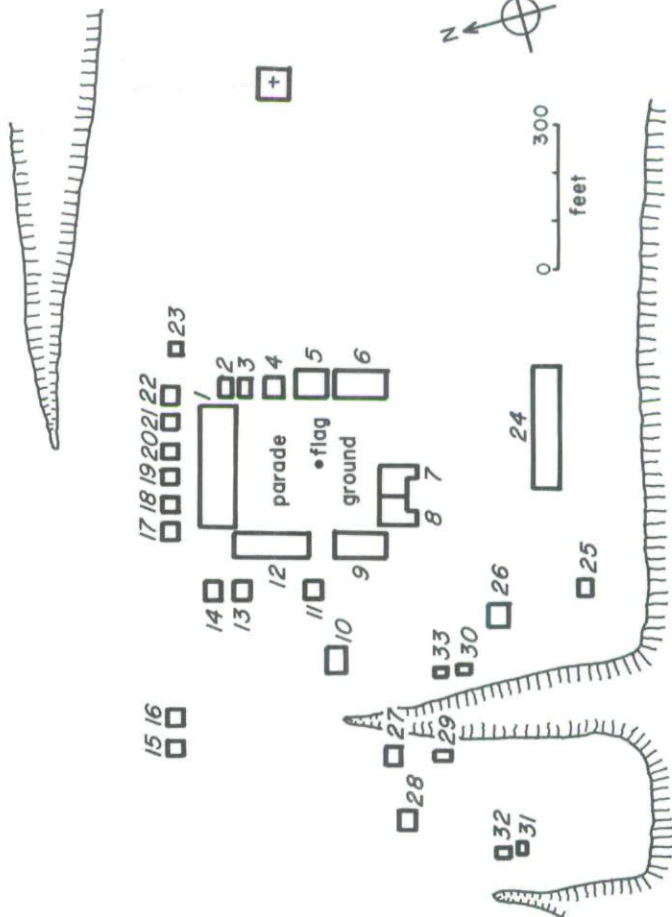
MINNESOTA

1853-1867



LEGEND

- 1 Barracks
- 2-3 Officer Quarters
- 4 Bakery
- 5-6 Officer Quarters
- 7 Headquarters
- 8 Surgeon's Quarters
- 9 Officer Quarters
- 10 Sutler's Store
- 11 Guardhouse
- 12 Commissary
- 13-14 Granaries
- 15-16 Magazines
- 17-19 NCO & Laundress Qrs.
- 20 Hospital
- 21-22 NCO & Laundress Qrs.
- 23-24 Stables
- 25 Interpreter's Qrs.
- 26 Granary
- 27 Sutler's Warehouse
- 28 Sutler's Home
- 29-31 Root Houses
- 32-33 Ice Houses



174 *South Dakota History*

measuring about twenty feet by ten feet, was flown during inclement weather.¹⁶

Fort Ridgely has received a great deal of unjust criticism over the years because it was built without a wall for defense. While it is true that some forts were built with walls, their numbers decreased sharply west of the Mississippi River. Numerous sound reasons explain this absence. First, the tremendous expenditure of materials and manpower needed to erect barricades rarely could be justified by the military personnel in charge. Living quarters, stables, and storehouses had to come first, and building them was a time-consuming task in itself. Second, there was a consensus among many officers and tacticians that the walls gave a false sense of security. The officers agreed that vigilance, training, and weapons were far superior protection to hiding behind a palisade.¹⁷ Then too, the war tactics of the various Plains tribes had to be considered. Their warfare keyed on mobility, and they depended upon the elements of surprise and hit and run. It simply was not to their advantage to openly siege a military position, especially when they knew that the call from a bugle or drum would muster well-armed soldiers. As alluded to earlier, the fact that the Sioux Indians actually did attack Fort Ridgely places the post among a small group of "elite" western military forts. A look at other prominent posts indicates the significance of the 1862 attacks. Minnesota's Fort Snelling is a good example. Occupied since 1819, it was never openly besieged by hostiles. Fort Laramie, Wyoming, is another classic example. From 1849 to 1890 Laramie stood as one of the most important posts on the northern Plains. It was continually garrisoned. There were almost always Indians in the immediate area, and sometimes under much less than friendly circumstances. Yet the fort was never attacked, nor was there such incident that could be remotely considered an attack.

During Fort Ridgely's period of use, it depended upon Fort Snelling for materials and men. It was estimated by one of the first officers at the post that by the usual land route the forts

16. *Revised United States Army Regulations* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), p. 461.

17. Mattison, *The Army Post on the Northern Plains, 1865-1885*, p. 5.

were some ninety miles apart; by water that distance was doubled.¹⁸ Riverboats were the most reliable transports. During low water periods, however, goods had to be hauled overland from docks near New Ulm.¹⁹

Actual settlements around Fort Ridgely were few. New Ulm, founded in 1854 and located some twenty miles to the southeast, was the closest of consequence. Further down river were the small hamlets of Saint Peter and Mankato. Straddling the Minnesota upstream from the fort was the Sioux Reservation. The Yellow Medicine and Redwood agencies on this reservation were recognized as small but important communities. The third military post in the state, Fort Ripley, was located some one hundred twenty-five miles north and east of Ridgely. Fortunately, roads were continually being established connecting these far-flung forts and settlements, and these aided in transportation and communication endeavors.

The troops that garrisoned Fort Ridgely before the Civil War were representative of the American army in the 1850s. This United States Army was small, born of a basic American distrust in a standing military force. From the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, ending the Mexican War, to 1855, the American forces rarely numbered over eleven thousand men. These figures were expanded somewhat after 1855, and from that date to the outbreak of the Civil War, the army ranged in size from fifteen to seventeen thousand strong.²⁰ Of those, approximately three-fourths served on the frontier at stations like Fort Ridgely, while the rest watched over America's seacoast fortifications.

From the close of the Mexican War to 1855, the line of the army consisted of eight infantry, four artillery, and three mounted regiments. After 1855, Congress authorized the addition of two infantry and two mounted units.²¹ For frontier duty any American regiment could theoretically number nearly nine hundred men, but these units were never up to strength. The average was one or two officers per thirty-to forty-man

18. Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, p. 66.

19. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 183.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

21. Robert M. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 20.

company, and three hundred to four hundred men per regiment.²²

A company of American regulars was a curious lot of individuals. Immigrants outnumbered native-born Americans by more than two to one.²³ Collectively, these were people who had left their homeland in response to the American promise of a new and prosperous future. In reality, these immigrants found harsh conditions—fortunately the army provided an alternative to unemployment and hunger. The native-born and foreigners alike came from all walks of life. There were farmers, craftsmen, well-educated teachers and professionals, businessmen, and adventurers. And of course, there were the misfits—some were one step ahead of the law—others were classified as bowery boys or social outcasts. This army has been accurately characterized as a “rag-tag and bob-tail herd.”²⁴

Of the varied branches of the regular army, only the infantry and artillery were represented at Fort Ridgely, and never in regimental strength. The average complement, from the date of the fort's founding until mid-1859, was three or four companies of infantry. Periodically in 1857 and 1858, an artillery company or two was also present. In August 1859, Fort Ridgely was designated a field artillery school. As a consequence, the composition of the garrison changed from one of almost all infantry to one of nearly all artillery.

The outbreak of the Civil War saw the recall of the regular army units stationed on the frontier. In their place came volunteer units, most mustered from home states and, occasionally, from distant locations. From 1861 through 1865, no less than sixteen different formal military regiments were represented at Ridgely. And though the majority were from Minnesota, the states of Wisconsin and Connecticut were also counted. Additionally, bands of local citizens, united under such colorful names as the Renville Rangers, the Brown County Militia, the LeSueur Tigers, the Frontier Avengers, the Eureka Squad, and the Irregular State Militia, served at the fort and in the Minnesota River Valley protecting settlers during the Uprising.

Company I of the First United States Volunteer Infantry

22. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

24. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 36.

Regiment was part of Fort Ridgely's resident garrison in 1864 and 1865. These "Galvanized Yankees," as they were called, were captured Confederate soldiers who had been given the choice of service in the West against the Indians or incarceration in Union prison camps for the duration of the war. Naturally, given the opportunity, the majority went west. The company at Ridgely experienced little but routine duty. For some of their companion outfits stationed on the Dakota frontier, however, it was not so pleasant. They guarded trails and communications lines, they garrisoned dozens of important forts, and many died in bloody warfare.²⁵ Following the Civil War and the mustering out of the volunteer regiments, a small regular army garrison was again maintained at Ridgely. But that complement from the Tenth Infantry lasted only until April 1867. By then Fort Ridgely had outlived its usefulness and was abandoned. (For a complete roster of all the companies and units stationed at Fort Ridgely, refer to Appendix).

Fort Ridgely, during its years of use, was home to numerous officers who would one day leave a significant mark on America's military record. J.J. Abercrombie, Alfred Sully, and Frederick Steele, for instance, became respected generals and had western military posts named in their honor. Sully gained special notoriety because of a series of campaigns he led in the mid-1860s against the Sioux, many of whom had participated in the 1862 Uprising in Minnesota. John C. Kelton, a young company commander at Ridgely in 1853, would one day rise to the position of adjutant-general of the army. Winfield Scott Hancock, present in 1853, became a highly respected Civil War general, and in the late-1860s participated in several important western Indian campaigns. Henry Maynadier, at Fort Ridgely as a Tenth Infantry lieutenant in 1856, later commanded the prestigious Fort Laramie and had a significant role in historic events at that post.²⁶ L. A. Armistead, of the Sixth Infantry, became a general in the Confederate Army and was killed at Gettysburg.²⁷ J. C. Pemberton also became a Confederate general and is best remembered for his defense of Vicksburg.

25. For an interesting look at these volunteer soldiers, see Dee Brown, *The Galvanized Yankees* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

26. Wilson O. Clough, "Mini-Aku, Daughter of Spotted Tail," *Annals of Wyoming* 36 (Oct., 1967): 187-216.

27. Walsh, *A Biography of a Frontier Outpost*, p. 28.

178 *South Dakota History*

While at Fort Ridgely, however, the lives of these men were far from glamorous and exciting. The able spokesman for the frontier army, Robert M. Utley, of the National Park Service, summarizes it best.

Frontier service meant abominable food and living conditions, grinding monotony punctuated at infrequent intervals by the hardest and least rewarding kind of field duty, long separation from friends and family and the comforts of civilization, and the prospect of death or disability from disease, enemy action, or a constitution broken by exposure or improper diet. It meant low pay, little chance of advancement or personal recognition, and for enlisted personnel harsh, often brutal discipline. Except during the Panic of 1857, it meant foregoing opportunities in civil life that offered nearly every advantage that the army did not. It meant persisting in a profession commonly held in contempt: "A soldier at that period was but little respected by civilians in the east," recalled an infantryman: he "was looked upon as an individual too lazy to work for a living."²⁸

An inadequate diet was the soldiers' first of many complaints. The prescribed single daily ration in the 1850s consisted of three-fourths pound of pork or one and a quarter pounds of fresh or salt beef; eighteen ounces of bread or flour, or twelve ounces of hard bread, or one and a quarter pounds of corn meal; and for every 100 rations, eight quarts of peas or beans or ten pounds of rice, six pounds of coffee, twelve pounds of sugar, four quarts of vinegar, and two quarts of salt.²⁹ Noticeably lacking were fresh vegetables and fruits. The individual was forced to secure these for himself. A common source was the sutler's store. There soldiers could use their meager pay to purchase canned or dried foodstuffs. Often soldiers grew their own vegetables, and fortunately, the soil and growing season were adequate for such endeavors. One of Fort Ridgely's medical officers, Assistant Surgeon Alex B. Hasson, commented in 1856 about the fort's progress at gardening.

An abundant crop of the ordinary roots, and of cabbages, cauliflowers, peas, beans, squashes, pumpkins, and cucumbers, may generally be relied on. The Lima beans, musk-melons, and cantaloupes, water-melons, and tomatoes, planted in the post gardens last year, were overtaken by the frost, and but a few

28. Utley, *Frontiermen in Blue*, p. 29.

29. *Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1857* (New York: Government Printing Office, 1857), p. 206.

attained perfection. This was owing to the late cold weather and drought in the spring, by which their progress was retarded. The preceding year was not so unfavorable, and the cultivation of these vegetables was more successful. Good crops of corn and oats have been made in the surrounding country, and experimental sowings of spring and winter wheat, rye, and buckwheat, have turned out favorably. No advantage is derived from planting in the open ground earlier than the middle of May. This section of country is yet too new to afford any satisfactory data upon the cultivation of fruit-trees.³⁰

The neighboring farms became an additional source of fresh produce. The early settlers around this and all military posts were quick to appreciate the advantages of the army market and grew many commodities for sale to the troops.³¹

The meager pay was another serious issue among the regulars. The first privates serving at Fort Ridgely, men of the Sixth Infantry, did so for seven dollars per month. On 4 August 1854 Congress enacted an army pay raise, and after that date a private served for eleven dollars per month, a corporal for thirteen dollars, a sergeant seventeen dollars, and a first sergeant, the highest company-grade noncommissioned officer, twenty dollars. Until 1857 a second lieutenant received twenty-five dollars per month, a first lieutenant thirty dollars, a captain forty dollars, a major fifty dollars, a lieutenant colonel sixty dollars, and a full colonel, seventy-five dollars. All officers were also given an allowance for rations and servants. After a raise in 1857, the base for officers was increased by twenty dollars per month. There was no major pay raise for enlisted personnel, however, until 1864. In that year privates and corporals were increased by five dollars per month, sergeants by three dollars a month, and first sergeants by four dollars per month.³²

What made the low pay especially irksome to soldiers was the fact that civilians were often employed by the army to perform the identical labors as the military men, but they were paid three or four times more than the soldiers. Construction work provides an excellent example of the contrast. In 1853 civilian master carpenters labored at Fort Ridgely for seventy-

30. Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, p. 68.

31. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 164.

32. Thomas M. Exley, *A Compendium of the Pay of the Army from 1785 to 1888* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1888), pp. 48-51.

180 *South Dakota History*

five dollars per month. A mason worked for wages varying from \$1.75 to \$2.25 per day. Common civilian laborers worked for twenty dollars per month. Soldiers, of course, did more than their share of this construction work too, but they received seven and eleven dollars per month—about thirty-seven cents a day! Other citizens commanded substantial pay too. Peter Quinn, the interpreter, though initially hired at two hundred dollars per year plus a ration, was raised to six hundred dollars per year in 1857. His salary was nearly equivalent to a major's pay.³³

On the other hand, the clothing of the men seemed to be adequate. The uniforms worn by the infantrymen when they arrived at the New Post on the Minnesota River in 1853 had been adopted two years earlier. A soldier was dressed in a single-breasted, dark blue wool frock coat, trousers of sky blue wool, a tall shako known as an Albert cap, a gray flannel shirt, cotton flannel drawers, woolen socks, and ankle high shoes of black leather.³⁴ Artillerymen's uniforms were similar to those worn by the infantry, with a few exceptions. Instead of the long frock coat, an artilleryman wore a short waist-length coat commonly known as a shell jacket. In addition, their trousers were reinforced for mounted wear, and they were issued riding boots.³⁵

Distinctive color facings helped to differentiate the various branches of the service. At Fort Ridgely, sky blue trim on the coats and caps identified infantrymen, while similarly placed scarlet trim distinguished artillerymen. Noncommissioned officers were identified by chevrons and stripes dyed the same color as their branch of service. The insignia and the eagle uniform buttons were made of brass. The shakos worn by all the men were elaborately trimmed, with a colored pompom at the top and a small stamped-brass eagle known as the "Arms of the United States" and a one-inch-high company letter on the front.³⁶ Soldiers also wore regimental numerals on their collars.

33. *Post Returns*, 1853, 1857.

34. Jacques N. Jacobsen, Jr., ed., *Regulations and Notes for the Uniform of the Army of the United States, 1851* (New York: Manor Publishing, 1972), pp. 2-10.

35. General Orders No. 1, Washington, D.C., 20 Jan. 1854. Jacques N. Jacobsen, Jr., ed., *Regulations and Notes for the Uniform of the Army of the United States, 1857* (New York: Manor Publishing, 1973), n.p.

36. Sidney B. Brinckerhoff, *Metal Uniform Insignia of the Frontier U.S. Army, 1846-1902* (Tucson: Arizona Historical Society, 1972), pp. 9, 14.



Above left, first lieutenant of infantry uniform; above right, infantrymen, about 1866; left, infantry private uniform of the 1850s and 60s; below, noncommissioned officers, about 1866-67, with Jeff Davis Hats.



182 *South Dakota History*



This drawing, by H. Charles McBarron, illustrates the regulation uniforms worn by the men at Fort Ridgely from 1855 until the Civil War. The high collar, twelve button jacket was adopted for mounted troops in 1854 and was used until 1872. The Albert caps remained in use until the mid-1850s, when they were replaced by black, broad-brimmed Jeff Davis hats. The officer at the right is distinguished by his coat trim, sash, and cap insignia.

General Orders No. 13, published on 15 August 1855, changed the pattern of hat worn by officers and enlisted men.³⁷ The style adopted, known either as the Hardee or Jeff Davis hat, was black, high topped, and broad brimmed. It was worn with part of the brim looped up and held in place with the "Arms of the United States" insignia. In addition, the hat was trimmed with a black feather, a colored worsted cord, and brass insignia.³⁸ Worn from 1855 to 1872, this hat represented one of the most colorful pieces of army headgear ever issued.

The Civil War brought numerous uniform changes. Generally, the ornate outfits prescribed by regulations gave way to less military, more functional attire. The nine button, knee-length frock coats, for example, were traded for dark blue, four button sack coats. For field and fatigue duty, the Hardee hat was

37. Jacobsen, *Regulations and Notes for the Uniform of the Army of the United States*, 1857, n.p.

38. Brinckerhoff, *Metal Uniform Insignia*, pp. 9, 14-15.

exchanged for a floppy crowned forage cap. Practicality became the rule and, except for dress occasions, that is the way it remained.

Of special concern to the soldiers were their weapons. The first troops at Fort Ridgely were armed with .69 caliber smooth-bore muskets. After changes in the mid-1850s, most foot regiments carried Model 1855 U.S. Rifled Muskets, .58 caliber.³⁹ Volunteer troops at Fort Ridgely during the Civil War are known to have used Sharps and Smith carbines and Colt percussion revolvers, among other varieties. Artifact evidence indicates the use of many popular mid-nineteenth-century civilian weapons at the fort, including among others, .32 caliber National Front Loading revolvers.⁴⁰ Also, it is possible that the Tenth Infantrymen at the fort in 1866 and 1867 used the new Allin converted Springfield rifles. These fired metallic .58 and .50 caliber cartridges and became known in later western campaigning as the famous and reliable "Trapdoor Springfield."⁴¹

Artillery armament was always present at Fort Ridgely. Six-guns, for example, representing five different models, were used during the 1862 Sioux attacks on the post. These included a six-pounder gun, a twelve-pounder mountain howitzer, a twelve-pounder howitzer, a twelve-pounder Napoleon, and a twenty-four-pounder howitzer.⁴² Perhaps the most popular of the above pieces was the twelve-pounder mountain howitzer. This little smooth-bore gun, with a one-half pound black powder charge, could throw an explosive projectile over a thousand yards.⁴³ These howitzers were particularly effective when loaded with antipersonnel charges, a fact proven at the fort in 1862.

It was ironic that most of the men who joined America's nineteenth-century frontier forces did so to fight Indians. In the

39. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, p. 27.

40. Donald B. Sayner, *The Orders of Col. Samuel McPhail, 1863* (Tucson: University of Arizona, 1973), p. 39.

41. In addition to .69 and .58 caliber bullets, the author has seen bullet or cartridge evidence from .32 caliber National Front Loading revolvers, and .36 and .54 caliber weapons in artifact collections from Fort Ridgely.

42. *Fort Ridgely: A Journal of the Past*, p. 5.

184 *South Dakota History*

long run, however, rarely did they have such an opportunity. It has been authoritatively estimated that a frontier soldier might participate in one combat during a regulation five-year enlistment.⁴⁴ Once in a while, Fort Ridgely's garrison did see this elusive field service. There is an occasional reference, for instance, in the fort's monthly *Post Return* of men being dispatched to the Sioux agencies, especially during annuity distribution time. For a period in 1860 and 1861, there was a subpost operating at the Yellow Medicine Agency, and troops from Ridgely rotated to it regularly.⁴⁵ Elements of the Fort Ridgely garrison did go to the field after the Spirit Lake, Iowa, fracas in 1857, but they did not engage any hostiles. Then of course, there was the 1862 Uprising, where troops from the fort fought doggedly at Redwood Ferry, Birch Coulee, Wood Lake, and at the post itself.⁴⁶

Generally, however, the daily routine at Fort Ridgely, as with all other frontier military posts, was monotonous and almost never changing. The 1856 daily schedule, printed below, could as well be dated 1854, 1860, or 1866. It read:

Reveille	4:30 a.m.
Surgeon's Call	6:15
Breakfast	6:30
Morning Fatigue	7:00
Guard Mounting	8:00
Orderly Call	11:00
Recall from Fatigue and Dinner Call	12:00 noon
Fatigue Call	2:00 p.m.
Recall from Fatigue	7:00
Retreat	Sunset
Tattoo	9:30
Extinguish Lights	9:45 ⁴⁷

The daily mounting of the guard was perhaps the most important routine at the fort. At 8:00 a.m. both the old and the

43. Harold M. Peterson, *Round Shot and Rammers* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1969), p. 96.

44. Don Russell, "Introduction," *Five Years a Dragoon ('49 to '54)* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. vii.

45. *Post Returns*, September 1860, September 1861.

46. For studies of the Uprising, see Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, chapter 13; C. M. Oehler, *The Great Sioux Uprising*; and Kenneth Carley, *The Sioux Uprising of 1862*.

47. G. Hubert Smith, "Some Sources for Northwest History: The Archives of Military Posts," *Minnesota History* 22 (Sept., 1941): 300.

new guard was formed on the parade ground. The detail was inspected, orders were read, and the countersign and parole issued. Duties of the new guard covered a twenty-four-hour period. These men were responsible for the prisoners, the internal and external security of the post, and the protection of the buildings, especially the magazines and storehouses. In addition, one private of this guard served as the post commander's orderly. Competition for this position was keen because the man selected often received a pass at the end of his tour, ate ahead of everyone else, and enjoyed other privileges.

Fatigue periods were also important, as this is when the necessary labors of the fort were accomplished. In the first several years of the fort's existence, the buildings were constructed during these fatigue periods, which included the procurement of the foundation stone, the making of shingles and bricks, and the cutting of timbers. That latter activity was carried on at the post sawmill in the Minnesota River Valley.⁴⁸ Furthermore, water had to be hauled, hay had to be cut from the prairie, roads had to be built, and the gardens had to be tended. The animals also required attention. There was painting, plastering, and repair work to do. Winter fuel had to be procured. At Fort Ridgely an officer, two noncommissioned officers, and thirty privates were assigned to that detail. They would cut, haul, and stack wood every day from morning fatigue call until sunset.⁴⁹ The soldiers grumbled about fatigue duty. Too often they saw themselves as little more than cheap labor, or "brevet architects," and not as real soldiers.

Formal inspections by officers from a headquarters post were a regular feature of any military routine—at Fort Ridgely as well as other posts and camps. The order for such an event typically read:

Head Quarters, 1st Reg't Minn. M.R.
Fort Snelling, Feb 10th 1863.

Special Order No 15.

In Compliance with Sec II General Order No 2. District of Minn. Department of the North-West, Nov 25th 1862.

Major John H. Parker, 1st Reg't Minn. M. Rangers will without

48. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 167.

49. Smith, "Some Sources for Northwest History" p. 300.

186 *South Dakota History*

unnecessary delay visit the Companies of the 1st Reg't M.M.R. Stationed at St. Peter, New Ulm & Fort Ridgely—and make a minute inspection of the condition of the posts.—The condition of Officers & Men and their proficiency in drill, their Quarters, Arms, Accoutrements and Horses, and give such instructions as may be necessary for the comfort of the men & the Good of the Service. And make a full & complete report to these head-quarters.

Sam McPhail Col Commanding
1st Reg't M.M.R.
W. M. Pierce Adj't⁵⁰

These inspections came frequently. The above same order, for instance, was published again as Special Order No. 45, Fort Snelling, 6 April 1863,⁵¹ and no doubt regularly thereafter.

The daily military schedule generally also included time for drill. This was most often done in company formation. The men would muster on the parade ground and practice the movements set forth in Hardee's 1855 *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*. When the Field Artillery School operated at the fort in 1859 and 1860, batteries received instruction and practical training in all matters of artillery theory and tactics. Unfortunately, the formal military training received by most soldiers was haphazard at best, since all too often the labors at the post consumed every available daylight hour. This was especially true at Fort Ridgely during its construction years.

The social outlets available to the garrison at Fort Ridgely were scant, owing in large part to the isolated condition of the post. Under such conditions the inhabitants turned to themselves for entertainment. Amateur theatricals were popular. Any available space was turned into a theater and soldiers would devote their free hours to practice and then performance. Dances, or "hops" as they were called, were also popular. Fort Ridgely was fortunate to have a band present during many of the years when regular army troops were in garrison. These regimental musicians could be counted upon to play at the hops and also, during the summer months, at concerts on the parade ground. Hunting and fishing were very popular outdoor activities. They had two-fold benefits, for not only was this great sport, but it helped supplement the boring diet. Plentiful

50. Sayner, *The Orders of Col. Samuel McPhail, 1863*, p. 9.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

game, including deer, squirrels, geese, teal, mallards, and grouse, could be found in the Minnesota River Valley. The numerous prairie lakes contained pike, catfish, bass, and turtles.⁵²

The sutler's store was a popular establishment during the soldiers' off duty hours. The men met with friends and engaged in cards or other games, or just sat around a warm stove and swapped tall tales. In addition, the store sold the ever popular clay pipes, smoking and chewing tobacco, plus "counter eats," beer, liquors, and dozens of other desirable items.

Fort Ridgely was fortunate in having a rather extensive library. Certainly Minnesota's larger city newspapers were received as well as those from many of the soldiers' hometowns. And there were books on history, biography, geography, mathematics, and varied agricultural subjects. It is often argued that those who benefited most by the library were the officers, because of their above average education. This is no doubt partially true because illiteracy was a problem in the enlisted ranks. To ease the situation, the opportunity to attend school was offered to everyone. Fort Ridgely's schoolmaster was the Reverend Joshua Sweet. Sweet joined the post in May 1856, with the dual responsibility of school teacher and post chaplain.⁵⁴ He served at Ridgely until it was abandoned in 1867.

Mail from family, friends, and loved ones constituted an important aspect of a soldier's existence. The duty of postmaster generally went to the sutler.⁵⁵ He would arrange for the transportation of the letters and parcels. These dispatches were carried overland by a military detail, most often routed either to or from the Fort Snelling-Saint Paul area.⁵⁶

Holidays provided occasions for special celebrations. Independence Day was the most significant of all. The troops would muster on the parade ground and, after listening to a patriotic address or two, would fire a national salute of one gun for every state in the Union. Following the formalities, the regularly scheduled military routine was suspended and the garrison

52. Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, p. 67.

53. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 207.

54. *Post Returns*.

55. *Ibid.*, December, 1856.

56. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 187.

188 *South Dakota History*

would adjourn to games, contests, and frequently, rifle or cannon firing competition. Christmas was another important holiday. That day would include religious services for the garrison conducted by the Reverend Sweet, visiting, and food feasts unequaled during the whole year. An example of a special meal served at Fort Phil Kearny, Wyoming Territory, in 1866, illustrates such a dinner.

Canned lobster, cove oysters, and salmon were a very fair first course; and associated with the game, were jellies, pineapples, tomatoes, sweet corn, peas, pickles, and such creature comforts, while puddings, pies, and domestic cake, from doughnuts and ginger bread up to plum cake and jelly cake, with coffee, and Madame Cliquot for those who wished it, and pipes and cigars for the gentlemen, enabled everybody to satisfy desires.⁵⁷

The health and welfare of the garrison was an important concern of Fort Ridgely's commander and medical officer. Fortunately, Ridgely was generally considered a salubrious post. Assistant Surgeon Alex Hasson recorded in 1856 that each man reported sick about once in every five and a third months. That fact, as well as the light character of the cases, argued, in the opinion of Hasson, for the healthfulness of the fort. Of the medical problems reported, diarrhea and ulcers constituted the largest numbers of complaints. The doctor attributed the former problem to soldiers eating too many wild plums. The Fort Ridgely medical personnel also treated civilian cases. One particularly tragic episode was the amputation of both legs of a sixty-year-old female patient. This woman's feet had been badly frozen after spending three days and nights on the prairie during a snowstorm.⁵⁸

However, the army of the 1850s and 1860s did have its health and morale problems, and many were evident at Fort Ridgely. Desertion and alcoholism were two of the worst and deserve special comment. The monotonous routine at the frontier posts and the absence of abundant leisure activities have been cited as the causes of the chronic alcoholic problems in the army.⁵⁹ This alcoholism was the root of many associated problems too. Court-martial records bear this out. At Fort

57. Margaret I. Carrington, *Absaraka, Home of the Crows* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1878), p. 142.

58. Coolidge, *Statistical Report*, pp. 74-75.

59. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, p. 40.

Ridgely, in a three-year period from 1856 to 1859, 148 enlisted men had charges preferred against them for offenses ranging from specific drunkenness, to conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline, to absence without leave.⁶⁰ This whole problem was one the army was hard pressed to correct and it continued throughout the nineteenth century.

Desertion took a very heavy toll on the already undermanned frontier army. The long work days, low pay, poor living conditions, and oft-times oppressive discipline help explain the problem. The situation at Fort Ridgely was certainly not an exception. For example, in the month of July 1855, 31 men deserted from the small three-company garrison that numbered merely 167 men.⁶¹ National statistics are even more startling. In 1856, 3,223 men deserted from an army that numbered about 15,000 strong. And of the first 500 men enlisted in the new Tenth U.S. Infantry in 1855, 275 deserted before completing their five-year term.⁶² Detachments from that same Tenth Infantry were at Ridgely in 1856-1857 and 1865-1867.

The year 1862 broke the boring monotony. The fort witnessed some of the harshest and cruelest warfare in the history of the plains. With an undersized complement numbering just over 100 men, the post withstood two determined sieges by Sioux. The *Post Return* for August 1862, the month of the attacks, carried the following imploring statement by young Lieutenant Timothy Sheehan, "Those were all the troops we had to defend the garrison against the whole Sioux nation." After 1862 Fort Ridgely rapidly declined in importance from year to year.

As the retaliatory campaigns against the Sioux were carried out following the Uprising, Fort Ridgely experienced lingering importance as an outfitting, staging, and supply post. After gold discoveries in western Montana Territory in the early 1860s, several wagon parties did use the fort as a jumping-off point on the northern overland trails. Minnesota volunteer troops also used the grounds for training purposes until the very close of the war. But Fort Ridgely's end was coming fast, especially as

60. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 46.

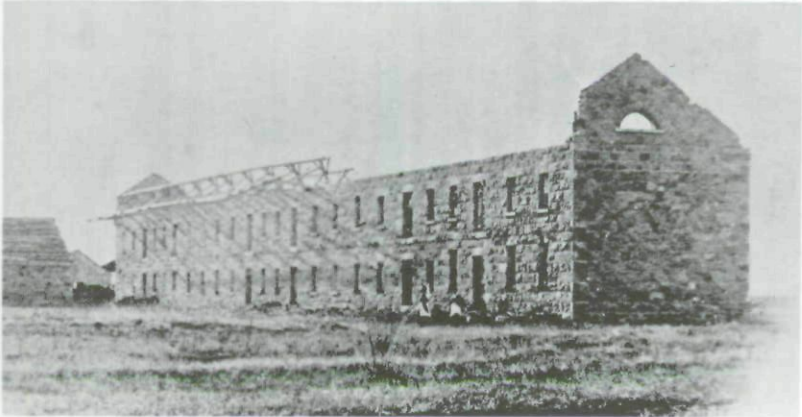
61. *Post Returns*.

62. Utley, *Frontiersmen in Blue*, pp. 40-41.

190 *South Dakota History*

the Sioux moved and were pushed westward. Newer military posts along the Missouri River were now experiencing the sense of immediacy that Ridgely once knew. Two companies of the regular army Tenth Infantry returned to garrison Fort Ridgely in November 1865. Their arrival marked the beginning of the end for the post. Company B of the Tenth stayed about six months and was withdrawn in April 1866. The seventy-five men of Company H stayed on one more year.

By 1867 the use of Fort Ridgely could no longer be justified by the War Department. Company H withdrew on 22 May.⁶³ The buildings they abandoned were left in the charge of Post Ordnance Sergeant William Howard. Sergeant Howard



Ruins of the enlisted men's barracks, 1879. This building was dismantled for salvage by local homesteaders.

remained on the site until 1872 when he too was transferred by the army. And, as has happened to literally every post in the West, when Fort Ridgely was left unprotected in 1872, local settlers almost immediately began to dismantle the structures. For them, the fort provided ready cut timbers, foundation stone, window glass, doors, hardware, and bricks. No account of Fort Ridgely's destruction is known to exist, but one pathetic photograph, dated 1879, shows the remains of the massive two-story barracks as it was being demolished.

The services performed by the troops during the fourteen

63. Prucha, *A Guide to the Military Posts*, p. 102.

years they occupied Fort Ridgely were many and varied. These men built the first roads and turned the first earth. They provided needed medical attention. They explored and mapped. Their pay served as a necessary and important monetary injection into the local economy. In the large sense, they established the foundations for peaceful settlement and development. But to do all this meant personal sacrifice. These men lived, out of necessity, in a self-contained, isolated environment, void of most comforts. They were poorly fed and underpaid. They endured physical and mental hardships. Some fought and died. But, as historian Francis Prucha recorded in his book *Broadax and Bayonet*, before these men of the army withdrew, they indeed transformed a wilderness.⁶⁴

Today, approximately three-quarters of historic Fort Ridgely is controlled by the State of Minnesota as Fort Ridgely State Park. This multiple-use recreation area includes among its vast acreage, the fort's parade ground, many building sites, and the two remaining army structures. The Minnesota Historical Society interprets the military heritage of the park and through their efforts building foundations have been exposed, archaeological surveys have and are being conducted, and the grounds have been marked with signs and displays. On 1 June 1975 the society dedicated a new museum at the fort, and through exhibits and audio-visual aids, the Fort Ridgely story unfolds for park visitors.

Delmar Dangers, a farmer and mink rancher, owns the remainder of the fort site. Dangers is very well versed on the history of the fort and the Sioux attacks. The fort's cemetery is still very evident and accessible. A stroll among its many old gravestones serves not only as a tie to early settlement, but also as a grim reminder of the horror of the 1862 Uprising.

64. Prucha, *Broadax and Bayonet*, p. 222.

192 *South Dakota History*APPENDIX
Military Units at Fort Ridgely*Regular Army*

2d Infantry:

- Co. C, July 1857-July 1858
- Co. E, Sept. 1854-June 1856
July 1857-Sept. 1858
May 1859
- Co. F, Sept. 1854-June 1856
July 1857-Oct. 1859
- Co. H, Sept. 1854-June 1856
- Co. K, June 1856
July 1857
Apr. 1861

6th Infantry:

- Co. C, Apr. 1853-Aug. 1854
- Co. E, May 1853-Aug. 1854
- Co. K, Apr. 1853-Oct. 1853
June 1854-Aug. 1854

10th Infantry:

- Co. B, Nov. 1865-Apr. 1866
- Co. D, July 1856-July 1857
- Co. G, July 1856-May 1857
- Co. H, Nov. 1865-Apr. 1867
- Co. I, July 1856-May 1857
- Co. K, July 1856-May 1857

2d Artillery:

- Co. G, Aug. 1857
- Co. I, May 1860-Mar. 1861
- Co. L, Aug. 1857
June 1859-Mar. 1861

3d Artillery:

- Co. E, July 1857-Aug. 1857
Oct. 1858-Mar. 1861

4th Artillery:

- Co. F, July 1859-Mar. 1861
- Co. K, July 1859-Mar. 1861

Volunteer Regiments

1st U.S. Volunteer Infantry:

- Co. A, May 1865-June 1865
- Co. F, June 1865
- Co. G, June 1865
- Co. I, Sept. 1864-May 1865
- Co. L, June 1865

1st Minn. Vol. Infantry:

- Co. B, May 1861-June 1861
- Co. G, May 1861-June 1861

2d Minn. Vol. Infantry:

- Co. B, July 1861
- Co. D, Aug. 1861-Sept. 1861

Co. H, Oct. 1864-Nov. 1864

Co. I, June 1864

Aug. 1864

Co. L, July 1864-Nov. 1864

Jan. 1866-Mar. 1866

3d Minn. Battery:

2d Section, Aug. 1864-June 1865

3d Section, Oct. 1863-Apr. 1864

1st Minn. Mounted Rangers:

Co. B, Feb. 1863-May 1863

Co. H, Feb. 1863-May 1863

Co. K, Sept. 1863-Oct. 1863

Brackett's Minn. Battalion:

Co. A, Nov. 1864-Mar. 1865

Co. B, Nov. 1864-Mar. 1865

Co. C, Nov. 1864-Mar. 1865

Co. D, Nov. 1864-Mar. 1865

Co. E, Aug. 1861-Sept. 1861

Co. F, July 1861

4th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. A, Oct. 1861-Mar. 1862

Co. B, Oct. 1861-Mar. 1862

5th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. B, Mar. 1862-Nov. 1862

Co. C, June 1862

Aug. 1862

6th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. A, Sept. 1863-May 1864

Co. B, Nov. 1863-Dec. 1863

Co. E, Jan. 1864-May 1864

Co. F, Sept. 1863

Co. H, Jan. 1864-May 1864

8th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. C, Sept. 1862-Nov. 1862

Co. D, Sept. 1862-Nov. 1862

9th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. A, Nov. 1862-Apr. 1863

Co. C, Nov. 1862-Aug. 1863

Co. F, Nov. 1862-Aug. 1863

Co. I, Sept. 1862-June 1863

10th Minn. Vol. Infantry:

Co. C, Nov. 1862-Jan. 1863

Co. G, June 1863

Co. I, Nov. 1862

2d Minn. Cavalry:

Co. A, Jan. 1864-Apr. 1864

Apr. 1865-Oct. 1865

Co. C, Jan. 1864-Apr. 1864

Oct. 1865

Co. E, May 1865-Oct. 1865

Co. F, Nov. 1864-Oct. 1865

Data obtained from *Post Returns*, Fort Ridgely, April 1853-April 1867, Records of U.S. Army Commands, Record Group 98, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are the property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except those on the following pages: p. 156, top left, p. 163, top, p. 164, top, p. 166, bottom, from Mrs. Patricia H. Pate, Fort Meade; pp. 159 and 223, from Robinson Museum, Pierre; pp. 171 and 190, from Minnesota Historical Society, Saint Paul, Minn.; p. 173, from Paul L. Hedren; p. 181, from National Park Service, Fort Laramie National Historic Site; p. 181, lower right, from Gordon Chappell Collection; p. 182, from Department of the Army; p. 224, from W. H. Over Museum, Vermillion.