

Mounted Riflemen
Correspondence 1849

Our Oregon Correspondence.

DETACHMENT OF MOUNTED RIFLEMEN, }
NEAR FORT HALL, May 16, 1849. }

A Regiment on the March to California—A Dramatic Sketch—Model Soldiers—Examination of Recruits—Arrival at Platte River—The Paucities—Military Scenes in a Marching Regiment.

Sometime in the month of April, I promised to send you, as opportunities presented, the details of our march to the Far West; and, to redeem that pledge, I now assume the quill. Hitherto, only one chance have I had to transmit a letter, and that by a government express; but then, my correspondence was limited exclusively to papers on official business. I will, however, try, hereafter, to get my general letters through at all hazards, trusting to the integrity of the carrier whether they will ever reach you or not.

The regiment of mounted riflemen, to which I am attached, was, at your last advices from me, stationed in camp, near Fort Leavenworth. Nothing of particular interest occurred there during our stay, except the flogging of some half a dozen for desertion, and shooting another for attempting it. Troops were arriving daily, and our regiment was rapidly filling up by the constant accession of new levies, who, after going through with an examination from the surgeon, become, if they pass through "approved," soldiers of the army. But, inasmuch as your all readers may not be aware in what the details of this examination consist, I will endeavor, in this place, to enlighten them.

After a recruit has enlisted into the army, and is sent to join his regiment, he must, on his arrival, be examined by an army surgeon, to determine whether he is physically as well as mentally qualified to perform the duties of a soldier. Recruits are generally brought in charge of an officer, who, with the commander of the regiment, must be present at the examination. They (the recruits) are then taken to a room, where they are stripped naked, made to walk backwards and forwards, throw their arms over their heads, and turn and twist about in different postures and shapes, in order to test their soundness of body and limb. I once brought a large number to a certain post, and was obliged, of course, to be present at the ordeal. The surgeon was a perfect gentleman of the old school, and noted for his eccentricity, his native generosity, plain dealing, and the most scrupulous regard to honor and integrity; and the result was, in substance, like the following scene, which was acted over and over again:—

Doctor—Come, young man; strip yourself quick, and walk this way. I can't be waiting here all day. Step along towards me. There, now, halt. Turn round. Now, walk. Now, come this way. Now, walk back again. Now, stop. Now, put your legs close together; throw your arms over your head; bring your hands close together; throw your arms back; hands close together. (Drumming his stomach.) Does that hurt?

Recruit—Odd zooks, I guess as how it does hurt summat.

Doctor—Hold your foolish tongue; you are very

uncivil to talk so much. Soldiers don't come here to talk; we don't allow any talking at this post; soldiers are not made to talk. How the devil came you to enlist? You are a poor cuss; you drank yourself to death, and then, to get a living, you enlisted in the army. Is it not so?

Recruit—I drink summat once in a while.

Doctor—Yes, I guess it is once in a while—always. You are a poor toad—a poor toad.—Please to remember, sir, that you are a poor toad, sir—that you ar'nt worth your salt, sir. Mark him rejected—I won't pass such a poor toad any way you can fix it. Go and put your clothes on.

Another—Here, walk this way; now hold out your hands—work your fingers—put your hands over your head; now cough—go and put your clothes on. Very good man—very excellent, healthy, and good looking. Only behave as well as you look, and you will do well enough. Remember to refrain from swearing and bad company. One thing more—A word in your ear sir—Remember to keep out of the guard house.

Such, with slight variations, constitutes the doctor's *modus operandi* of an examination. The recruit is then taken to the orderly sergeant of his company, who clothes him in complete uniform, and sells, for the benefit of the recruit, his citizen's dress. Thus he becomes a soldier of the United States army, liable to be marched the next day to any part of our wide-spread territory—to California, Oregon, or Texas, or the Lord knows where.

From this episode we return to the place where I left off—near Fort Leavenworth. We all remained in camp till May 1st, when our company (B) left for our western destination, near Bear River. A steamboat took up the Missouri to old Fort Kearny, our sick and all our company's property, together with a large amount of quartermaster and commissary stores, for our sustenance and comfort at our new homes. We proceeded by land to old Fort Kearny, a distance of 160 miles from Leavenworth. We remained here on the west bank of the Missouri till the 10th, and then took up our line of march through the boundless solitudes of the prairie. I ought, however, to state, that two companies of the 6th infantry started for new Fort Kearny nearly at the same time, under the command of Lieut. Davis, formerly of our regiment. They buried five men from the cholera, and shortly after our command lost an excellent man by the name of Lyons, from the same cause.

May 10.—This day is an important era in the history of our campaign, for it is the day we, that is, Company B. and a small detachment of Companies I. and G., started on our long march. The first day we travelled about twenty miles, without seeing a bush, and encamped on a wretched-looking stream, the name of which nobody knows. It rises, no doubt, in obscurity, and empties nowhere, just like all other streams that have no pedigree to recommend them, or the benefit of a Christian education.

Friday morning, May 11.—Brownmiller, sound the music! call for Reveille! says the adjutant. Toot-a toot-a toot-a-a toot-a-a toot toot-a-a toot-a-a toot-a-a toot toot toot. Turn out! says the orderly-sergeant—Fall in there, quick!—Right dress!—Cast your eyes to the right and dress!—Steady!—Front!—Parade!—Rest!—Blow off, Brownmiller!

Fah la lot, tweedle dum tiddle de de,
Fah la da nunky stum nix cumma rous,
Nincumpoop, sumadiddle fiddle de de,
Fa la la Lumpkins fiddle dy funk!

Atten-ti-on!—Sergeant Scoop? Here. Funk? Here. Corporal Tweezer? Here. Privates Tocgers? Here. Fipkins? A voice—He ish de cook, &c., &c., to the end of the roll. Brownmiller, sound the stable call!

All you that are able,
Come go to the stable,
And water the horses, and give them some corn.
And if you don't do it,
The old man will know it,
And you will all rue it,
As sure's you're born.
Hey diddle diddle,
The cat's in the fiddle, &c.

The horses are then curried, watered, and fed, and the men get their breakfast of ham and coffee. The "Generale" is then sounded, the tents are struck, and all luggage being packed away in wagons. The teamsters are hitching on, and are beginning to swear at and thrash stubborn mules. The orderly-sergeant is in a fever, punching this man to his duty, and then that. The captain gives the order mount, and breaks his company into column of march; and, after an abundance of hooting and cursing, and shouting and scolding, and running off the track, the whole train tumbles, rumbles, and jumbles along, looking at a distance like a huge caterpillar. During this day, and in fact, throughout the whole march of 1,300 miles, we were constantly encountering clouds of California emigrants; some with oxen, some with mule teams, and every mother's son his rifle. We marched this day eight or nine miles, and encamped on Salt river—an excellent place for old broken down political hacks to recuperate. The water was so brackish and dirty, that the coffee made from it tasted like General Scott's bombardment of Vera Cruz, "awful." We hauled our seine and caught some excellent fish, upon which we made a sumptuous repast—and for what the Lord gave let us be truly thankful.

For a long distance on the road we were now travelling, we occasionally saw huge elk horns on the sides of the path; but by what accident the animals visited here and lost their cuckoldom, and forgot to take their horns away, no Indian can tell.

On the 16th, we struck Platte river. On its opposite bank lies a Pawnee village. Some months ago they abandoned their former village, situated on the south bank, some miles above, and located themselves at their present place. They suffered terribly last winter from scarcity of food—all their cattle, horses, and mules being immolated to satisfy their hunger, and prevent starvation. Yet these wretches, surrounded by a soil the most fertile in the world, prefer the precarious and vagabond existence of a hunter, to that of a cultivator of the earth, whereby they could derive not only a good living, but wealth and affluence, without half the exertion they are now driven to. Look at the immense labor it costs them to subsist through the year! Some time in the spring they make preparations for the hunt. A few acres of corn are planted—just enough to furnish yoke egg, (pounded, parched corn,) and the women and old men are left to take care of it; and such a taking care you never did see! They then pack their trumpery on horses or Indian ponies, and strike off six or seven hundred miles after buffalo. Here they commence killing the animals and drying the meat; and when the season has so far advanced as to preclude the possibility of hunting any longer, they pack up their meat and skins for home, liable to be robbed by other tribes on their way, and lose in an hour the labor of a whole season. Thus passes their whole life away. If they are successful, they can procure whiskey enough to lounge around the dirt floor of their cabins, in a state of maudlin intoxication, till the hunting season comes round; if otherwise, then starvation, with all its train of horrors, stares them in the face, when they are compelled to resort to the most disgusting food to keep soul and body together.

AN OFFICER OF THE RIFLES.

Our Overland Correspondence.

DETACHMENT OF MOUNTED RIFLEMEN,
EN ROUTE FOR BEAR RIVER,
May 21, 1849. }

*Indians—Their Bodies and Souls—Reflections,
Moral, Political and Sentimental—Marching con-
tinued, &c.*

We are now encamped near Fort Kearny, six hundred and fifty miles from Leavenworth.

I will now resume my remarks about the Indians. I said, in my last, that in a time of scarcity, they were obliged to resort to disgusting food, to keep soul and body together. Souls! It is doubtful whether they have any; for if intellect and intelligence, and all those mental and moral qualities which dignify and exalt the human character, and purify and ennoble a man, and render him only a little lower than the angels—if these are deemed the essential evidences of the soul, then the Indian (I say it openly) has none to brag of. The souls of such wretches—so debased by turpitude and depravity, with all the light which civilization and Christianity are spreading around them, are not worth praying for five minutes. And yet there are thousands in our land of light, who can neglect the charity claimed at their own doors, and squander their hundreds “for the conversion of these poor heathen.” Better spend your money where it will do some good—better sow your grain where it will take root and grow—not upon the moral desert of an Indian’s heart.

But the answer to all this is, give them more light, let them receive instruction. But how can you teach those who are incapable of instruction? How can you teach or instil? To teach requires an instructor capable of instructing a subject or theme, and a pupil capable of instruction. Let the instructor be ever so qualified, if the theme cannot be taught, or the pupil be incapable of instruction, or comprehending it, which is the same thing, the sooner the instructor goes into the grocery business or tavern keeping, as Kitchum did after he quit the army by the disbanding of his regiment, the better it is for him and all concerned. You may teach an elephant to dance a hornpipe, or a hog to whistle, and all men will pronounce it wonderful; but all will admit, that, as a general rule, neither the one nor the other could make a qualified musician or dancing master. What nature has made let us not seek to counteract, but improve. Nature has made the Indians unfit for social or civilized life—of moral culture. They must give way to those that are, and thus will be fulfilled that passage of Scripture which declares, "I will give thee the heathen for an inheritance." They must give way, they have given way, and it is a law of nature that they should. The time has come when intellect must govern the universe. Mexico must surely fall to the United States—China, and all Asia, likewise, to the British. The whole of California will soon be under the dominion of France, England and the United States;

and ignorance and wretchedness, savage monarchs, with their cruel and bloody sacrifices of human victims, Indian tortures, and the massacre of helpless age and infancy, the funeral pile, and all these horrid customs which debase the name of man, will vanish, and with their authors, be utterly exterminated from the face of the earth; and the places that now know them will know them no more for ever. God decrees it; his word declares it; and his character, as exhibited as moral Governor of the Universe, shows that he will carry it out. God grant that my eyes once behold that day—then give this worthless body to the worms.

Thursday, 17th, Friday, the 18th, and Sunday, the 20th, we marched the usual distance on each of these days, that is, from twenty-five to twenty-nine miles, depending upon the quality of the roads. On Friday, we passed the "Pawnee" village heretofore alluded to. The houses are built in the following manner:—Sticks are placed upright in a circle, perhaps fifteen or twenty feet in diameter, the tops standing a little inwards towards the centre. To these, sticks are horizontally bound; this constitutes the first or basement story; rafters then extend from the upper circumference or eaves, and meet at a common centre, where a hoop is placed for the escape of smoke. Tall grass is then set upright all around the side and on the top, and on this a thick covering of dirt, so that the whole establishment resembles a coal pit precisely. A short distance from this village was a grave, surrounded with the skulls of cattle, probably as an index that he was a great brave, that is, expert in stealing cattle.

Saturday, the 20th May, about 12 o'clock, we met a body of one hundred and fifty or two hundred Indians, of the Sioux tribe. They were mounted all on ponies; most rode without saddles, and their general appearance bore a suspicious resemblance to so many scarecrows. I was at the head of my company, marching by column of two's, that is two abreast. When I got within 100 yards, they formed line about three paces apart, and advanced that way to meet us, their rags and tags streaming in the wind. When within speaking distance, they halted—their chief, a vagabond, bare-footed loafer, dismounted and advanced to meet me, and who, by who dint of hard study, had mastered "how to too." He presented me a paper, on which was written, as near as I can remember, the following pithy recommend—

The Barrer ish the good cheeff Agle Body (Eaglebody meant), and he ish one goot maan. He gomma among the Sioux, and he is much grand, and him is ma friend, ma chera, and I tell all te good maan along to Road dat he ish goot maan and no verrie Baad.

SAMUEL JOHNSON.

Having read this very learned discourse on the virtues of a ragged, good-for-nothing varlet, I folded it up, and handed it back, and having unbuckled a pair of spurs, I put them upon the naked, scaly heel of the "Agle Body," who immediately grunted out "Pawnee," when all took to their horses, and were out of sight in a moment. I learned that this ceremony was intended as a token of respect to me and my command, and therefore, in duty bound, felt "much grand." AN OFFICER OF THE RIFLES.

[New York Herald, April 25, 1850 p. 6 contributed by Ben Truwe]