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## Article Title: Fort McPherson in 1870: A Note by an Army Wife

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Article Summary: Mary Patience Magwire Carr spent two years at Fort McPherson, Nebraska, from 1869 to 1871. After her husband, Bvt Major Gen Eugene A Carr, major of the Fifth United States Cavalry, died in 1910, she wrote the reminiscences contained in the article.

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Photographs / Images: General Eugene A Carr, Mrs Carr, and Mr and Mrs Clark Carr, 1891; Fort McPherson (Fort Cottonwood) sketch by Major George M O'Brien;

## FORT McPHERSON IN 1870: A NOTE BY AN ARMY WIFE

EDITED BY JAMES T. KING

**M**ARY Patience Magwire Carr spent two years at Fort McPherson, Nebraska; she came in October, 1869, and left in November, 1871. Several months before her arrival at the post, her husband, Bvt. Maj. Gen. Eugene A. Carr, major of the Fifth United States Cavalry, had led his Republican River Expedition to victory over the Cheyenne at the Battle of Summit Springs, Colorado. With this battle, Indian danger on the central plains frontier had been practically ended, and the Fort McPherson area was on the verge of rapid settlement.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Magwire met Carr, a Civil War hero and a veteran of the plains Indian campaigns of the 1850's, in St.

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<sup>1</sup> For the settlement of Nebraska after 1870, see James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955), pp. 176-180. For the summer campaigns of 1869, see George F. Price, *Across the Continent With the Fifth Cavalry* (New York, 1883), pp. 134-143, or James T. King, "The Republican River Expedition, June-July, 1869." *Nebraska History*, XLI, 3 (September, 1960)

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Louis in 1863. They were married in 1865, just after the end of the war. Throughout the following years in which Carr was becoming one of the better-known Indian-fighting generals, Mary stayed at his posts only when his regiment was in garrison; her two years at Fort McPherson was one of these periods. During Indian campaigns or other hazardous times, she ordinarily returned to the east—often to her parents' home in St. Louis. After the General's retirement in 1893, the Carrs made their residence in Washington, D. C.

The reminiscence which follows these introductory paragraphs was taken from Mrs. Carr's memoir of her husband, which was written several years after his death in 1910. She did not intend to produce a polished literary work. Rather, she was writing a personal document to her grandchildren, with the hope of uniting herself with the General in the memories of their descendants. She recalled for them the sort of things that a proper Victorian lady might be expected to observe—the landscape, the social life, her home. In setting down these first-hand impressions of her life at a frontier post, however, Mrs. Carr has preserved them not only for her family but also for the history of Nebraska and the American West.<sup>2</sup>

#### FORT McPHERSON, 1869-1871

Fort McPherson was a large Cavalry Post in the forks of the Platte River about 100 miles west of Omaha, on the Union Pacific Railroad, the only railroad crossing the continent to San Francisco. The nearest town was North

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<sup>2</sup> This typewritten manuscript, "Memoirs of Bvt. Maj. Gen. Eugene A. Carr," is some 170 pages in length. It is in the Carr Family Papers, in possession of Mrs. Carr's granddaughter, Mrs. Theodore Van Soelen of Santa Fe, New Mexico. A microfilm copy is in the Nebraska State Historical Society.

Platte, 14 miles [to the] west of us where there was one Company of Infantry and a small barracks.<sup>3</sup>

I had at last reached "the plains" and understood what that comprehensive word meant. It was like the sea. As far as the eye could reach, vast stretches of vacant land, blank and nothing in sight. The mountains had very little vegetation except at the very summits. There were no trees, but the air was clear and bracing, and there were still deer and antelope and prairie chickens to be hunted. We had a square brown frame house of one story. Large rooms and large porches. The houses were all in line facing an immense square, called the 'parade ground.'

I had taken two women servants from [my home in] St. Louis. We were soon established in my first Army home. We had good saddle horses. Clarkey<sup>4</sup> had a pony, and our greatest enjoyment, as it was [General Carr's], was hunting. We had to ford the Platte which was full of quicksand and often dangerous. We would ride out on our horses, and an ambulance would follow with the dogs to run the deer. Sometimes it was all hunting, and no finding, but it was a beautiful sight to see the deer at a distance, even if the dogs could not overtake them.

We had a fine band of music, and at this time at the post were Major Urban,<sup>5</sup> Lieutenant Hayes,<sup>6</sup> who was

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<sup>3</sup> Established in 1863, Fort McPherson was known successively as Cantonment McKean, Post Cottonwood Springs, and Fort Cottonwood; in 1866 it was named in honor of Maj. Gen. James B. McPherson, who died in the Civil War. (See H. J. Zabel, "History of Fort McPherson," MA Thesis, Colorado State College, Greeley, 1954.) The post was located in fact east of the forks of the Platte, south of the railroad, and some 250 miles west of Omaha. The "mountains" of which Mrs. Carr speaks are not the Rocky Mountains, but rather the hills and bluffs around the Platte River.

<sup>4</sup> "Clarkey" is Clark Magwire Carr, the Carrs' eldest son and the only one to survive childhood. During the Spanish-American War he served as an officer of United States Volunteers, and later became a prominent businessman in New Mexico.

<sup>5</sup> Bvt. Maj. Gustavus Urban, a captain in the Fifth Cavalry, was born in Prussia; he rose through the ranks in the Civil War and earned his brevet commission at the Battle of Deep Bottom, Va., in 1864. He died at Fort McPherson in January, 1871. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 407-9.

<sup>6</sup> First Lieut. Edward M. Hayes began his service in 1855 as bugler in the Fifth (old Second) Cavalry and retired with the rank of brigadier general in 1903. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 446-9; F. B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C., 1903), I, 515.

Quartermaster, Lieutenant Forbush,<sup>7</sup> who was Adjutant, Captain Walker,<sup>8</sup> Lieutenant [Colonel] Kellogg,<sup>9</sup> Captain Montgomery,<sup>10</sup> Captain Sam Sumner,<sup>11</sup> Captain Price,<sup>12</sup> Lieutenant Volkmar,<sup>13</sup> Lieutenants Thomas (now General Earl D. Thomas),<sup>14</sup> Bache,<sup>15</sup> and others, all of the 5th Cavalry. "Buffalo Bill"<sup>16</sup> then lived near the Post and was the Government Scout, for every now and then there would be Indian raids by small bands who would cross the railroad, slip in and steal horses from any settlers near by. Then the Railroad authority would telegraph Department

<sup>7</sup> First Lieut. William C. Forbush joined the Fifth Cavalry upon his graduation from West Point in 1868. He retired as colonel of the Twelfth Cavalry in 1903. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 462-3; Heitman, *Register*, I, 428.

<sup>8</sup> Bvt. Maj. Leicester Walker, the captain of Company H, and an officer in the Fifth Cavalry since 1861, was honorably discharged from the Army in 1870 at his own request, and settled at North Platte as a farmer and banker. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 379-81.

<sup>9</sup> Bvt. Lieut. Col. Sanford C. Kellogg, a first lieutenant in the Fifth Cavalry, later served as aide-de-camp to Lieut. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan, and retired in 1898 with the regular rank of Colonel. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 436-8; Heitman, *Register*, I, 589.

<sup>10</sup> Capt. Robert H. Montgomery, who enlisted as a private in the Fifth Cavalry in 1860, retired as major of the Tenth Cavalry in 1892. Heitman, *Register*, I, 720.

<sup>11</sup> Bvt. Maj. Samuel S. Sumner, a son of Maj. Gen. E. V. Sumner, won his brevets in some of the hardest fighting of the Civil War. He later served as a major general in the Spanish-American War. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 391-3; Heitman, *Register*, I, 936-7.

<sup>12</sup> Lieut. George F. Price, author of the regimental history cited in these notes, was a captain of volunteers in the Civil War. He died as a captain in the Fifth Cavalry in May, 1888. His autobiography is in Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 441-6.

<sup>13</sup> Second Lieut. William J. Volkmar entered the Fifth Cavalry upon his graduation from West Point in 1868. He served as General Sheridan's aide-de-camp from 1881 to 1885 and was later assistant adjutant general of the Army. He retired in 1900 with the rank of colonel. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 460-2; Heitman, *Register*, I, 988.

<sup>14</sup> Second Lieutenant Thomas, an enlisted man in the Civil War and a West Point graduate of 1869, was promoted to brigadier general in 1908 and retired shortly before the First World War. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 526-8; Heitman, *Register*, I, 953.

<sup>15</sup> First Lieut. Albert B. Bache had been an officer in the regiment since 1867. He died at Fort Dodge, Kansas, just after the campaigns of 1876. Price, *With the Fifth Cavalry*, pp. 515-7.

<sup>16</sup> William F. Cody, Chief of Scouts for the Fifth Cavalry in 1868 and 1869, was currently employed at Fort McPherson as military scout. For an excellent biography of Cody, see Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill* (Norman, Okla., 1960).

Headquarters at Omaha and General Augur<sup>17</sup> would order out a Scout[ing expedition], Buffalo Bill always being the guide and trailer. On one occasion Lieutenant Thomas went out, had quite a fight and brought back a lot of stock and many ponies, burros, arrows, Indian head dresses, war bonnets, etc. etc.<sup>18</sup>

We all went to the corrals to see the captured ponies. The Pawnee Scouts<sup>19</sup> who were with Lieutenant Thomas laid claim to the entire lot, but General Augur decided differently. General Carr selected two beautiful white ponies, a perfect match, with long flowing tails and manes. We called them 'Romeo and Juliet.' When they were trained to harness I was sitting on the veranda one afternoon at Fort McPherson with General Sweitzer,<sup>20</sup> who had come from Omaha on some military duty. He said, "Look at your ponies," and there they were harnessed to a pretty light pony carriage. They were a present to me from General Carr. It was a great surprise, though nearly every

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<sup>17</sup> Bvt. Maj. Gen. Christopher C. Augur, a West Point graduate of 1843, was brigadier general commanding the Department of the Platte. He retired in 1885. Heitman, *Register*, I, 175.

<sup>18</sup> This was a skirmish which took place on June 8, 1870, with a group of horse-stealing Indians. Lieutenant Thomas, with Scout William F. Cody and Company I of the Fifth Cavalry, followed the Indians in a two-day gallop across 120 miles of the Nebraska plains, killed two of the enemy and scattered the others. District Commander Carr issued a general order concerning the "difficult and hazardous undertaking" and declared Thomas and Cody "worthy of the highest commendation." See General Orders, District of the Republican, June 22, 1870. Order Book, Ft. McPherson, National Archives and Records Service, Record Group 98. In 1890, Thomas—by then a captain in regular rank—received a long-delayed brevet promotion to first lieutenant for this action.

<sup>19</sup> If there were Pawnee with Thomas' detachment, they evidently were not a part of Maj. Frank North's famous Pawnee Battalion, although they might have been veterans of that unit. The Scouts were mustered out in late 1869 and were not called back to service until the fall of 1870. While Frank and his brother Luther North and some of the Pawnee saw service as guides and hunters in 1870, it is likely—since neither Luther North nor Carr's order mentions the Pawnee—that Mrs. Carr has confused this incident with the return of the expedition to the Republican River commanded by the colonel of the Fifth Cavalry, Bvt. Brig. Gen. Thomas Duncan, in October 1869. See Donald F. Danker, ed., *Man of the Plains, Recollections of Luther North, 1856-1882* (Lincoln, 1961), pp. 124; 132-56. Also Post Return, Fort McPherson, October, 1869. NARS RG 98.

<sup>20</sup> Bvt. Brig. Gen. Nelson B. Sweitzer was a major of the Second Cavalry and assistant inspector general of the Department of the Platte. He retired in 1888 with the regular rank of colonel of his regiment. Heitman, *Register*, I, 940.

one at the post had seen the pony carriage, and many of our friends came rushing out from their verandas to see how I liked it. There was a little seat behind for "Clarkey," and after going out with [General Carr] for a few times I drove them daily, but there were not many drives and we were cautioned not to go too near the hills.

Often I would go out when the Officers and ladies went on horse back. There was a ranch called "Burke's"<sup>21</sup> near the railroad station about 5 miles from the Post; and three miles from the station, which was on the other side of the Platte River, there was a long shaky bridge, a most unsafe and awful looking structure; and why we did not fall through it was simply from good luck. We had asked the daughters of General Augur, the Department Commander at Omaha, . . . [Jennie and Mollie Augur] to come to McPherson, to make us a visit. General Carr, Lieutenant Forbush and Lieutenant Hayes went to meet them. The train was due at midnight. We had no telephone in those days to tell us if it was on time or not. But they reached the Post safely. The next morning we heard that the Indians, a small band, had rushed in and stolen 10 or 12 head of Burke's stock from his corral.

After their raids Scouts would be sent out, but these small bands were seldom captured. They knew all the hiding places, all the ravines, and never showed themselves in the open.

We always had a very gay time when we had visitors at the Post, especially young ladies. Dancing parties, called "Hops," riding parties, hunts, etc. etc.<sup>22</sup> There were a number of young Officers who vied with each other in entertaining our friends and guests. There was an island called Brady's Island<sup>23</sup> where we used to go to hunt deer.

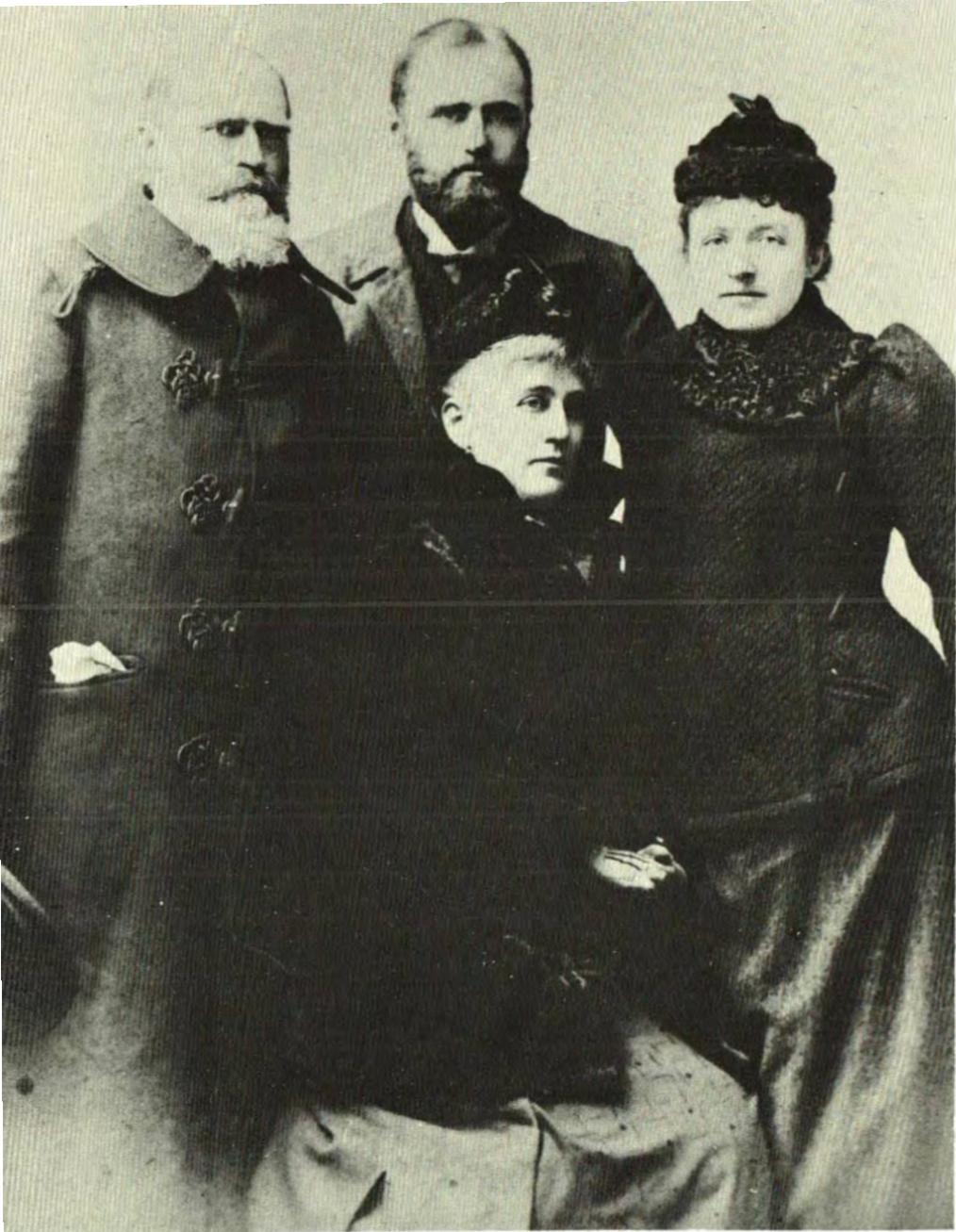
There was a great deal of tall underbrush where the deer browsed and the dogs would draw them out. It was rather a novel idea to hunt them with grey hounds who

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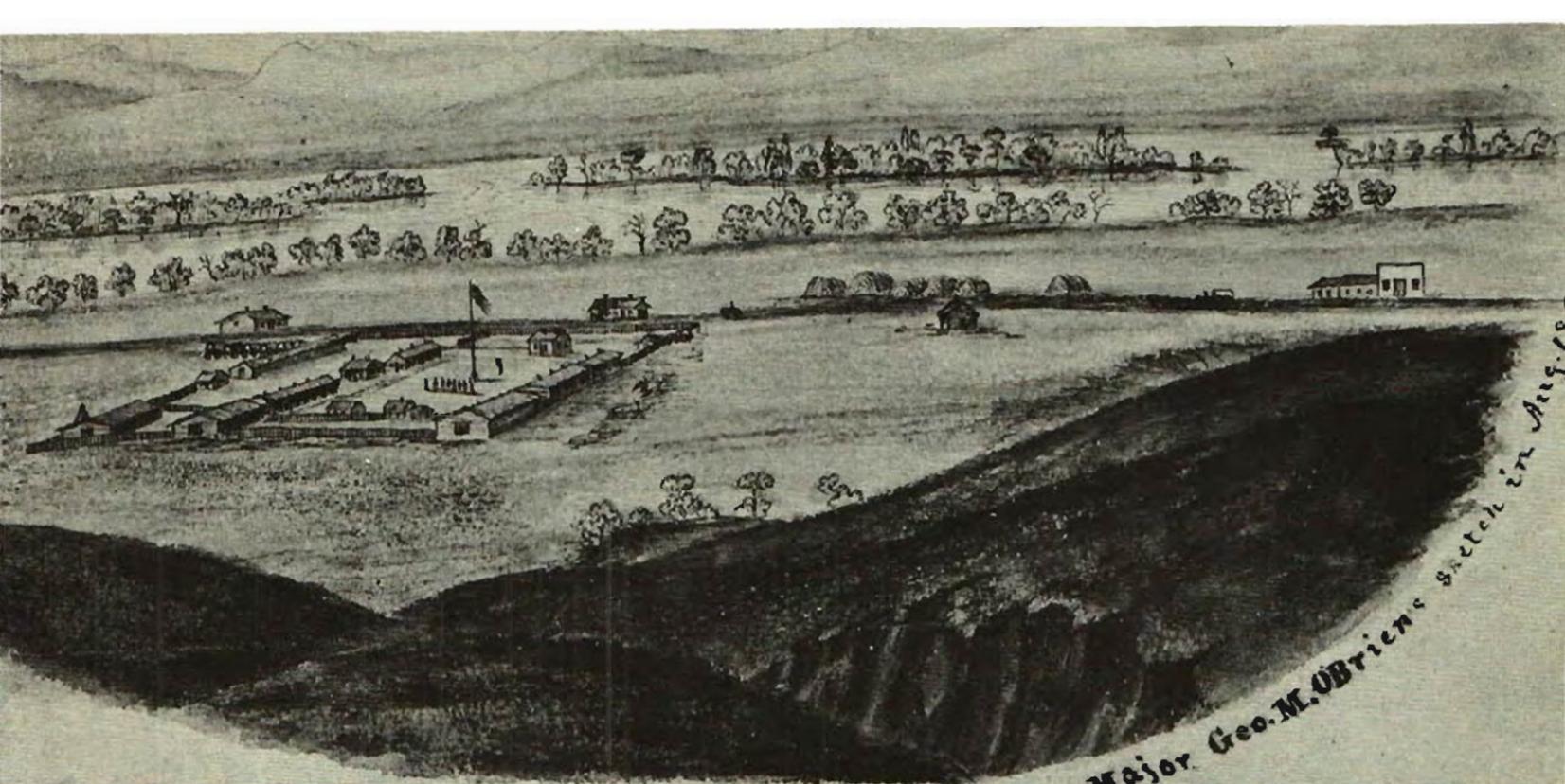
<sup>21</sup> This was the ranch belonging to an early settler, John Burke. After the Sioux destroyed his first ranch house in 1868, he purchased an old stage station a short distance from the fort. See Danker, ed., *Man of the Plains*, pp. 96, 125.

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent coverage of such social life at similar western posts, see Edward M. Coffman, "Army Life on the Frontier, 1865-1898," *Military Affairs*, XX, 4 (Winter, 1956).

<sup>23</sup> Near the present town of Brady, Nebraska.



Left to right: General Eugene A. Carr; Mrs. Carr, seated;  
Mr. and Mrs. Clark Carr, 1891



FORT COTTONWOOD, N. T.

Fort McPherson, sketch by Major Geo. M. O'Brien (courtesy Joslyn Art Museum)

have not a very keen scent.<sup>24</sup> But once driven into the open country they were easily run down. A herd of antelope and deer was a very pretty picture, as we looked at them at a distance. We could see such immense distances on those level plains, and we always took the field glasses with us. After a long ride on horseback we could always return in the ambulance which followed us.

Our larder was always plentifully supplied with venison, not now so easily found in the markets. Then we had prairie chickens, once or twice we had bear meat, but it has a coarse beefy taste and we did not like it; but General Carr got two [bear] skins which we used until worn out. The buffalo had almost entirely disappeared. They had been driven and shot and eaten by the people who built the Union Pacific Railroad.

'Buffalo Bill' was employed to kill and furnish the meat for the employees [of the railroad]. His fine shooting had given him his name of Buffalo Bill. Occasionally parties would come out from the East but they had to go a great distance to find the buffalo ranges. General Sheridan [in the fall of 1871] sent a party of friends from Chicago and New York, James Gordon Bennet, Leonard Jerome, Dr. [Morris J.] Ashe and others.<sup>25</sup> . . .

During the time of the visit of the Misses Augur we had an Indian scare at Ft. McPherson. Burke, the man who had the Ranch on the road to the Station, came galloping into the Post one afternoon shouting at the top of his voice, 'Indians, Indians!' We all rushed out, and rushed in

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<sup>24</sup> Carr kept several pet greyhounds. Luther North relates one story about them in Danker, ed., *Man of the Plains*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>25</sup> "The party," stated William F. Cody, "consisted of General Sheridan, Lawrence R. Jerome, James Gordon Bennett, of the *New York Herald*; Leonard W. Jerome, Carroll Livingston, Major J. G. Hecksher, General [Charles] Fitzhugh, General H. E. Davies, Captain M. Edward Rogers, Colonel J. Schuyler Crosby, Samuel Johnson, General Anson Stager, of the Western Union Telegraph Company; Charles Wilson, editor of the *Chicago Evening Journal*; General [D. H.] Rucker, Quarter-Master-General, and Dr. [Morris, J.] Asch—the two last-named being of General Sheridan's staff. . . . A brisk drive of less than two hours . . . brought them to the fort, where they found the garrison, consisting of five companies of the Fifth Cavalry, under the command of General Carr, out on parade awaiting their arrival. The band played some martial music, and the cavalry passed very handsomely in review before General Sheridan." William F. Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody*, . . . *An Autobiography* (Hartford, 1879), p. 281.

again, not knowing but what the Indians were upon us. Jennie Augur and Mollie were preparing for a walk and arranging their hair. Jennie called out, "Oh, never mind, Mollie, about your hair, the Indians will get us."

General Carr was at his Headquarters, but they soon had mounted soldiers following Burke, and found out that Burke had seen a few Indians on horse back and that they were preparing to make another raid on his stock. But it made a good Indian story for Omaha newspapers: "The daughters of General Augur escaped capture by Indians at Ft. McPherson, etc. etc."

The settlements were very few and far between in those days. Large tracts of land were used for cattle ranges and it was the hey-day of the cattle industry. Cattle were sold for \$30.00 and \$40.00 per head. An enormous amount of capital was invested and many fortunes were made.

We had a friend at North Platte, the widow of the Postmaster General under General Grant, Mrs. [Alexander] Randall.<sup>26</sup> She had invested largely in cattle and business; rode out with the manager and cow boys to the round up. She was a very interesting as well as a very beautiful woman, [and] had been a cabinet hostess in Washington. She had a comfortable home at North Platte where we often visited her and she frequently came to the Post and stayed a week or more with us. It gave her a great change from her monotonous life at North Platte, and she said it was the one bright spot in her western life. Many years afterwards she married a man at North Platte and, I believe, is still living there.

The railroad property was very dependent upon the protection of the Military posts—Ft. McPherson, Ft. D. A. Russell [Wyoming] and a small post at North Platte and at Sydney [sic], Nebraska. They were very generous with railroad passes and we frequently made visits to Omaha and once or twice to St. Louis. Omaha had a large Post not far from there where General Augur, Generals Palmer,<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Randall, the energetic "War Governor" of Wisconsin, was assistant postmaster-general under President Lincoln, and postmaster-general under President Andrew Johnson. He married Helen M. Thomas of Elmira, N.Y., in 1863. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XV, 344-5.

<sup>27</sup> Bvt. Maj. Gen. Innes N. Palmer, colonel of the Second Cavalry, had won commendations for his service in the Mexican War and the Civil War. He retired from the Army in 1879. *Heitman, Register*, I, 767.

King,<sup>28</sup> and Sweitzer were stationed, with the 9th Infantry and 2nd Cavalry. In the town lived General Ruggles,<sup>29</sup> General John P. Hawkins,<sup>30</sup> who was Commissary of Department, and others. It was a great dissipation<sup>31</sup> and pleasure for us to stop over there and see our friends. . . .

We remained at Ft. McPherson from the fall of 1869 to the 27th of November, 1871, when General Carr was assigned to the command of the 5th Cavalry and ordered to the Department of Arizona.

The military post that Mrs. Carr describes, then, lay in an area where the frontier was rapidly changing. The buffalo were vanishing; the cattleman's frontier was moving in; the region had its "Indian scares," to be sure, but it was free from the imminence of organized Indian attack which had been present until so recently. The years of Mrs. Carr's residence at Fort McPherson were a kind of "watershed" in the history of western Nebraska—whether she was aware of it or not, Mary Carr had been watching a part of Nebraska's rapid transition from wilderness to civilization.

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<sup>28</sup> Bvt. Maj. Gen. John H. King, colonel of the Ninth Infantry, retired from the Army six years before his death in 1888. In the Civil War he distinguished himself at Chickamauga and at Ruff's Station, Ga. Heitman, *Register*, I, 599.

<sup>29</sup> Bvt. Brig. Gen. George D. Ruggles, assistant adjutant general of the Department of the Platte, later served as adjutant general of the Army. He retired in 1897. Heitman, *Register*, I, 851.

<sup>30</sup> Bvt. Maj. Gen. John P. Hawkins was later commissary general of the Army and retired in 1894 with the regular rank of brigadier general. Heitman, *Register*, I, 513.

<sup>31</sup> "Dissipation" was a current genteel slang word for "diversion."