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Article Summary: The neglected literature of the military frontier provides much material for historians. King examines poetry and balladry. He emphasizes the differences between the soldier poet's West and the frontier described by others.

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# THE SWORD AND THE PEN: THE POETRY OF THE MILITARY FRONTIER

BY JAMES T. KING

PERHAPS no part of the American past has been more celebrated in prose, poetry and ballad than has the frontier experience. Each type of frontier, moreover, has had its own contribution to make. The cowboy, for example, begged not to be buried "on the lone prairie." The miner sang of the "herring boxes without topses" which shod the dainty feet of his darling Clementine. The farmer might intone such a variation on "Beulahland" as:

Nebraskaland, Nebraskaland,  
As on thy fiery soil I stand,  
I look across the plains  
And wonder why it never rains,  
Till Gabriel blows his trumpet sound  
And says the rain's just gone around.<sup>1</sup>

It is heartening to find a growing recognition of the importance of this kind of literature, for through it the past

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<sup>1</sup>B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (New York, 1944), p. 313.

may address the present in a dramatic, immediate and personal way.

Still shrouded in neglect, however, is the literature of one phase of the American West—the military frontier. This is particularly unfortunate in view of the richness of its lore and letters. The novels of Capt. Charles King, for instance, although perhaps not great literature, are historical documents of a way of life.<sup>2</sup> Its folklore produced such gems as the legend of the soldier who grew so accustomed to the heat of Arizona that when he died and went to Hell he sent back for his blankets.

It would be impossible in a paper of this sort to survey adequately the whole literature of the military frontier, but a consideration of one segment of it—its poetry and balladry—may suggest the wealth of material yet to be exploited by those who would know the American past.

The importance of such material does not lie necessarily in its artistic merit, for much of the poetry of the military frontier, from a strictly literary viewpoint, deserves a merciful oblivion. Its real significance lies rather in the insights it might provide into the life, attitudes and ideals of the people who produced it. As Walter Prescott Webb observes in *The Great Plains*, if life in the West was in fact different from that in the East, “then that difference will reflect itself in the literature.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the poetry of the military frontier underscores not only the difference between a civilized East and an untamed West, but also the difference between the soldier’s West and other kinds of frontiers.

The military frontier was not bound to the land in the sense that the farming or mining frontiers necessarily were. The soldier in the West was a civilized nomad, liable to be moved hundreds of miles on the shortest notice. His

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<sup>2</sup> Charles King, *Campaigning With Crook* (Norman, 1964), pp. vi-xx. Don Russell’s excellent introduction to this new edition includes significant commentary on King’s novels.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (New York, 1931), p. 453.

society was an artificial one, called into existence to fill a particular need, and subject to dissolution when that need had been fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> If his poetry deals with the land at all, it views the terrain simply as a place to live and fight, not as the source for his economic support. His concerns are primarily practical ones—food, officers, enlistment, comradeship, the imminence of death, conflict with a foe. His self-expression is often earthy, boisterous and irreverent, and his poetry should serve as a reminder that the drama of the military frontier was accompanied by hardship, privation, loneliness and adversity. The very way in which the various facets of the soldier's life find their place in the literature of his frontier suggests that they were accepted often with a cheerful optimism, sometimes with philosophical resignation, but never with despair.

The span of the American military frontier may be dated roughly from 1815 to 1890. It began with the plan of establishing a boundary line to run from Fort Snelling in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico, west of which would be Indian territory, and it ended with the conquest of the entire continent and the restriction of the Indians to small, closely-defined reservations.<sup>5</sup>

The pre-Civil War military frontier was primarily concerned with holding the boundary line and moving the Indians to the west of it to clear the way for a rapidly expanding white population. The result was a series of Indian wars. Probably the finest of the soldier-poets of that era was George Waynefleet Patten. Graduated from West Point in 1826, Patten served in the Indian wars of the East in the 1830's and 1840's and of the West in the 1850's. His health weakened by severe wounds received in the Mexican War, he nevertheless remained in the Army until his retirement as lieutenant colonel of the Second Infantry in 1864.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> James T. King, "The Military Frontier—What Was It," *West-erners' Brand Book* (Chicago), XXI, 12 (February, 1965), pp. 89-90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Philip D. Jordan, "George W. Patten, Poet Laureate of the Army," *Military Affairs*, IV, 3 (Fall, 1940), p. 164.

Patten's poetry caught the vibrancy and the dynamism of a nation convinced that it had ascertained its Manifest Destiny. "He sang the song of the sword," Philip D. Jordan has stated, "[he] described the Rio Grande as a 'shining land where the gold-mines lay,' pictured the *Spitfire* shelling the castle of San Juan d'Ulloa, wept at the burial of a West Point cadet, and told of the young scout who loved to wear his weapon bright." Written during the Seminole War, his poem "The War Drum" is typical of his spirited verse; it begins:

The war-drum beats throughout the land  
 The red man swore to yield,  
 A thousand braves have drawn the brand,  
 Go arm ye for the field.  
 And let in words of crimson dye  
 Each flag one motto claim,—  
 We greet no friend but Victory,  
 We fear no foe but shame.<sup>8</sup>

Equally stirring is his "Song of the Dragoon," in which his verse surges forward as forcefully as a cavalry charge:

Our march is like the thunder gust!  
 We prostrate where we pass,  
 And broader is the trail we leave  
 Along the tangled grass.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our halt is where the prairie wolf  
 Barks at the grizzly bear,  
 And every robe we lie on  
 The buffalo must spare.  
 Break not, my boys, the squadron's line,  
 Down with the forest spar!  
 Cut with your swords the tangled vine!  
 Onward! Huzza, huzza!<sup>9</sup>

All of Patten's poetry, however, did not share such rhythmic beat or bellicose swagger. In interesting contrast are the funereal lines of "The Soldier's Dirge":

Oh! toll no bell  
 When I am gone.  
 Let not a bugle swell  
 The mournful tale to tell:

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> G. W. Patten, *Voices of the Border*, . . . (New York, 1867), pp. 43-44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

But let the drum  
 With hollow roll,  
 Tell when the angels come  
 To take my soul:  
 And let the banner, borne before me,  
 Wave in azure glory o'er me,  
 When I am gone.<sup>10</sup>

The attack on Fort Sumter in 1861 turned military concern from the West to the East for four years; but with the collapse of the Confederacy, American population resumed its surge to the West, and once again the Army became the cutting edge of the frontier. The campaigns of Philip H. Sheridan and George A. Custer in the Indian Territory, of Eugene A. Carr in Nebraska and Colorado, and of George Crook in the Southwest were early signs of expanding Army operations against the Indians.

In the post-Civil War period the literature of the military frontier came of age. Some soldiers exulted in the martial life. A trooper in the Eighth Cavalry, for instance, recalled a ballad which made up in enthusiasm for what it lacked in delicacy of meter and rhyme:

Oh the life of a soldier is wild and romantic

\* \* \* \* \*

We hunt the deer and buffalo, the elk and cunning  
 panther too,  
 And through many a wild and roving redskin  
 We are often forced to put the daylight through.  
 Then hurrah for a good suit of blue  
 A carbine, a horse and pistol, too;  
 Then hurrah for the prairies, the wild woods and  
 mountains,  
 We pass a wild and reckless life away.<sup>11</sup>

The glories of the great outdoors were a fine reward for the soldier, to be sure, but other advantages of the blue uniform are suggested in "Who Wouldn't Be a Soldier?"

The cavalryman gets on his horse,  
 He answers water call,  
 He grooms and curries his good old friend,  
 With care he cleans the stall;  
 When evening comes, he sees his lass;

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> F. G. Kurz in *Winners of the West*, VIII, 6 (May 30, 1931), p. 8.

With her head upon his shoulder,  
He embraces her and shouts aloud,  
Who wouldn't be a soldier?<sup>12</sup>

Other enlisted men, however, showed less enthusiasm. A case in point is the Irish immigrant depicted in "The Old Army Guardhouse Song," who stepped ashore in New York, "seen the flags awavin'," and "heard the music play," and was promptly induced to join the Army:

They measured me and told me I was just the lad to win  
The shoulder straps in half a year if I would just go in.

He found not a lass "with her head upon his shoulder," but rather "mosquitoes, swamps and brakes, . . . centipedes and snakes," and therefore suggested a suitable fate for his recruiters:

May the devil take the sergeant and his circumventin'  
crew  
Who seduced me to the rendezvous and dressed me up  
in blue.<sup>13</sup>

Life in the Army was often far different from the glamorous visions conjured up by the recruiting posters. Capt. John G. Bourke observed that "the poor wretch who enlisted under the vague notion that his admiring country needed his services to quell Indians" sometimes found himself "carring a hod and doing odd jobs of plastering and kalsomining" in a frontier post under construction.<sup>14</sup> This was precisely the complaint of the hero in "Farewell Bunkie," who, having decided that the Army involved more perspiration than inspiration, informed his bunk-mate that he had settled upon desertion as the most convenient way out:

Farewell, Bunkie, I must leave you,  
For I must skidadle quick;  
But, oh Bunkie, I will leave you  
My old shovel, hoe and pick.  
For, oh, they say my gun was rusty  
And you know they must be right;

<sup>12</sup> W. F. Dillon in *Winners of the West*, X, 3 (February 28, 1933), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Col. Albert Fensch in *Winners of the West*, IV, 8 (July 30, 1927), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> J. G. Bourke, *On the Border with Crook* (New York, 1891), p. 7.

But, oh Bunkie, my pick and shovel  
Were always clean and shining bright.<sup>15</sup>

For the vast majority who determined not to go "over the hill," there was much in Army life to give rise to poetic comment. One verse, for example, hymned the virtues of the Army bean:

'Tis the bean that we mean  
And we'll eat as we ne'er ate before  
The Army Bean, so nice and clean  
We'll stick to our beans evermore.<sup>16</sup>

Another depicted the recruit, still far from the image of the seasoned soldier:

His coat e'er much too short  
His pants a mile too wide  
And when he marched could not keep step  
However much he tried.<sup>17</sup>

Still another referred to the questionable backgrounds of many of the soldiers, suggesting that it was not unknown for a man to enlist one jump ahead of the law:

Oh, what was your name in the States?  
Was it Thompson or Johnson or Bates?  
Did you murder your wife  
And fly for your life?  
Say what was your name in the States?<sup>18</sup>

Citations could go on indefinitely, for poetic observations were made about mules, Apaches, Army surgeons, castor-oil, Texas, the ever-present Irishman, officers, hard-tack and an infinite number of other topics. Many of these bits of doggerel were sung to the tune of "The Regular Army, O," which had as many printable and unprintable versions as the First World War's "Mademoiselle From Armentieres." As a rule, each verse would conclude with the lines,

The drums they roll, upon my soul, for that's the way  
we go

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Edwards in *Winners of the West*, VII, 12 (November 30, 1930), p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> S. E. Whitman, *The Troopers* (New York, 1962), p. 55.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Botkin, *American Folklore*, p. 861.

Forty miles a day on beans and hay, in the Regular  
Army, O!<sup>19</sup>

A lively body of verse also grew up around the bugle calls which regulated the life of a frontier post. Examples might include mess call, which indicts the Army cook's legendary disrespect for the soldier's stomach:

Soupy, soupy, soupy, not a single bean;  
Coffee, coffee, coffee, not a bit of cream;  
Porky, porky, porky, not a strip of lean.<sup>20</sup>

or stable call, which hints at a sad fate for the negligent soldier:

Come to the stable  
All ye who are able,  
And give your horses some oats and some corn;  
For if you don't do it  
Your colonel will know it  
And then you will rue it  
As sure as you're born.<sup>21</sup>

Any discussion of soldier poetry would have to include the work of John Wallace Crawford, better known as "Captain Jack, the Poet Scout." Despite his prolific output of verse, Crawford has slipped into obscurity even in the Plains country which he so often celebrated. He deserves better than this, for if anyone has earned the title "Poet Laureate of the Military Frontier," it is Captain Jack. Although closely identified with Nebraska and the Dakotas, Crawford was born in County Donegal, Ireland, in 1847 and came to the United States as a boy. According to his own testimony, Captain Jack's childhood, which was anything but happy, was responsible for making him that rarest of all frontier breeds, a teetotaling Army scout. "Liquor," said Crawford, "deprived me of a good father, made him forget his own flesh and blood, deprived me of even the rudiments of an education, and sent me to bed many a night crying for bread." On her deathbed, his mother Susie Wallace Crawford extracted a pledge from

<sup>19</sup> B. A. Botkin, ed., *A Treasury of Western Folklore* (New York, 1951), pp. 748-9.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth B. Custer, *Following the Guidon* (New York, 1904), p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

her boy. "Johnny," she said, "promise me you will never drink intoxicants, and then it will not be so hard to leave this world." Young John promised, and evidently he was faithful to that promise the rest of his life.<sup>22</sup>

When the Civil War broke out, Crawford ran away from home several times to join the Army. Each time he was sent back because of his youth, until at last he was accepted into the Forty-Eighth Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. Severely wounded at Spottsylvania, Crawford was sent for convalescence to a hospital in Philadelphia, where he was taught to read and write by a Sister of Charity, and then returned to his regiment to serve until the end of the war.<sup>23</sup>

After Appomattox, Crawford went to the West, where his career included service as a mail carrier from Sidney, Nebraska, to Red Cloud Agency, chief of scouts for the Black Hills Rangers, military scout for the Army, correspondent for the *Omaha Bee*, and friendship with some of the best-known characters on the frontier. Among his associates were James B. "Wild Bill" Hickok, Martha "Calamity Jane" Canary, and the artist and photographer Charles L. Stobie.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps best known of all his comrades was William F. Cody, with whom he was associated for many years in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. In one of his poems he used frontier idiom to eulogize his friendship with Cody and with a third scout, Jonathan "Buffalo Chips" White, who often cooked for Buffalo Bill:

We us' ter mess together, that 'ar Chips an' Bill an' me,  
An' ye oughter watch his movements; it would do ye  
good ter see  
How he use 'ter cook them wittles, an' gather lots o'  
greens,  
Ter mix up with the juicy pork an' them unruly beans.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> J. W. Crawford, *The Poet Scout*, . . . (San Francisco, 1879), pp. xi-xv.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* See entry for Crawford in *Who's Who in America*, 1916-1917.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in John M. Burke, "*Buffalo Bill*" from *Prairie to Palace* (New York, 1893), pp. 182-4.

Jonathan White earned his nickname because of his intense devotion to Buffalo Bill, which extended even to imitating the famous scout's dress and walk; on a buffalo hunt General Sheridan was supposed to have called him "Buffalo Chips" to suggest, rather unkindly, that he was only a pale imitation of Cody. According to Crawford, however, White had his revenge:

when the hunt war over, an' the table spread for  
lunch,  
The gener'l called for glasses, an' wanted his in punch;  
An' when the punch was punished, the gener'l smacked  
his lips,  
While squar' upon the table sat a dish o' *buffalo chips*.

Needless to say, Sheridan was not overjoyed at this proposed banquet, and White, we are told in the poem, avoided the General's wrath by riding out of camp

as fast—aye, faster—than the gener'l did that day,  
Like lightnin' down from Winchester some twenty miles  
away.<sup>26</sup>

Death could come suddenly and unexpectedly in the Indian wars, and it came to "Buffalo Chips" in the skirmish at Slim Buttes, Dakota Territory. Captain Jack was watching as Cody's faithful friend crept close to the besieged Sioux and was struck down by an Indian bullet. White was buried on the battlefield, and the entire command was marched across the grave to conceal it from the Indians. Memorializing "Chips" in a poem he presented to Cody, Crawford wrote:

He's sleepin' in the mountains near a little runnin' brook.  
Thar's not a soul to see him, 'cept the angels take a look,  
Or a butterfly may linger on his grave at early morn—  
No mortal eye may see it till old Gabriel toots his horn;  
For we laid him 'neath the foot trail that the Sioux  
might never know,  
As they'd dig him up and scalp him if they had the  
slightest show;  
And we marched two thousand footmen and horsemen  
o'er his breast—  
Without a stone to mark the spot, we left the scout to  
rest.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

The summer campaign of 1876, of which the Slim Buttes skirmish had been the concluding fight, was a vain attempt of two expeditionary columns to round up the Sioux. Crawford had joined the southern column in August, 1876, carrying dispatches from Fort Fetterman. He also carried a present from the superintendent of the Union Pacific Railroad to Buffalo Bill—indeed, he was probably the only scout in the entire frontier Army who could have been trusted to carry it—a bottle of sour mash whiskey. Since the command had been bone dry for weeks, Cody stealthily divided it with two others—General Carr and San Francisco newspaper correspondent Barbour Lathrop—and the three thanked their lucky stars that the courier had been Captain Jack.<sup>28</sup>

Commanding the Southern column was General Crook, whose headquarters of the Department of the Missouri were ordinarily at Omaha, Nebraska. Crawford admired the General and lauded his willingness to share the campaign hardships of his men:

Old Crook! I should say gen'l, cos he war with the boys,  
 Shared his only hard-tack, our sorrows and our joys;  
 And thar is one thing sartin—he never put on style;  
 He'd greet the scout or soldier with a social kinder  
 smile.  
 An' that's the kind o' soldier as the prairy likes to get,  
 An' every man would trump death's ace for Crook or  
 Miles, you bet.<sup>29</sup>

There were others in Crook's column, however, who did not share in Crawford's enthusiasm. Dissatisfaction usually centered on Crook's apparent favoritism towards the packers, who usually had better food, better places to camp and more adequate supplies than the footsoldier:

I'd like to be a packer,  
 And pack with George F. Crook  
 And dressed up in my canvas suit  
 To be for him mistook.  
 I'd braid my beard in two long tails,  
 And idle all the day

<sup>28</sup> Crawford, *Poet Scout*, pp. 34-36; W. F. Cody, *The Life of Hon. William F. Cody*, . . . (Hartford, 1879), pp. 349-350.

<sup>29</sup> Burke, *Prairie to Palace*, p. 183.

In whittling sticks and wondering  
 What the New York papers say.<sup>30</sup>

The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the annihilation of General Custer's command was the most momentous event of the summer. When he received a telegraphed question from Cody—"Have you heard the news from Custer?"—Crawford replied in poetry:

Did I hear the news from Custer?  
 Well, I reckon I did, old pard;  
 It came like a streak of lightnin'  
 And you bet, it hit me hard.

\* \* \* \* \*

He always thought well of you, pard,  
 And had it been heaven's will,  
 In a few more days you'd met him,  
 And he'd welcome his old scout Bill.  
 For if ye remember at Hat Creek,  
 I met ye with General Carr,  
 We talked of the brave young Custer,  
 And recounted his deeds of war.

Captain Jack revealed a typical frontier prejudice in his poem as he denounced those religious and social groups which urged peace and conciliation with the Indians; in the concluding stanzas he asserts that

One day the Quakers will answer  
 Before the great Judge of us all  
 For the death of daring young Custer  
 And the boys who around him did fall.<sup>31</sup>

There was little that could not serve as inspiration for Crawford's ready pen. Towards the end of the 1876 campaign, for example, an old timer came into camp seeking provisions. He saw General Crook conversing with an officer, Captain Jack relates, and the miner exclaimed, "By gosh, I've see'd that face afore." Finding that it was Crook, the miner returned to the campfire and related that the General, with a detachment of soldiers, had rescued his wife and child from the Indians in Arizona. "The incident was so pretty," stated Crawford, "that I wrote the following verses on it the same evening, and gave the old miner

<sup>30</sup> Fairfax Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army* (New York, 1941), p. 163.

<sup>31</sup> Cody, *Life*, pp. 348-9.

a copy of it. His hand trembled with emotion, and the tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks when he read it." The poem, entitled, "God Bless Ye, Gener'l Crook," recounts the miner's arrival in camp, his recognition of Crook, and then concludes:

"Ye know I've prayed ter see him  
 Just once before I die;  
 He saved my wife and baby  
 When the red-skins had 'em took."  
 With outstretched hand he, sobbing, said:  
 "God bless ye, Gener'l Crook!"

"I reckon ye don't remember  
 Old Bill as run the mail  
 Way down in Arizony,  
 When ye war on the trail;  
 An' how thet frosty mornin'  
 Ye saved my Tommy's life,  
 An' took a heap o' chances—  
 She told me—Jane, my wife.<sup>32</sup>

The combination of a touching incident with Crook's name helped to make the poem a popular one. But the quality of fame is often transitory. Years later, when Captain Jack had taken to the stage and lecture platform, he continued his recitation of the poem—with, however, some significant changes. Although the scene of the rescue had changed from Arizona to Nebraska, the old miner still recognized a familiar face and he still burst into tears. But now he said,

"He saved my wife and baby  
 When the reds began to muster."  
 With outstretched hand he, sobbing, said:  
 "God bless ye, Gener'l Custer!"

and he went on to explain:

"I reckon ye don't remember  
 Old Bill as run the mail  
 From Sidney up to Red Cloud  
 When ye war on the trail  
 An' how that frosty mornin'  
 Yer saved my Tommy's life.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Crawford, *Poet Scout*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>33</sup> J. W. Crawford, *Lariattees: A Book of Poems and Recitations* (Sigourney, Iowa, 1904), p. 29.

Either the old prospector had not learned his lesson the first time and had permitted his hapless family to be placed in jeopardy twice, or—more likely—the magic of the Custer name had proved a greater box-office attraction than that of the less spectacular Crook.

The Battle of the Little Big Horn provided Crawford with other material as well—it inspired the poem “The Dying Scout,” for example, which was dedicated to Muggins Taylor, one of Custer’s couriers. Very similar in tone and content to the Civil War poetry with which Captain Jack must have been familiar, it concludes:

Comrades, tell my mother truly,  
 How we fought to hold the hill;  
 Tell her how we gained the vict’ry—  
 That I died a soldier still.  
 Hark! I hear a voice up yonder,  
 All is sunshine, bright and fair;  
 Tell my mother I am dying—  
 She will meet her boy up there.<sup>34</sup>

This poem, too, became a favorite of many audiences, and was set to music by Beaumont Read, who—Crawford states with a touch of pride—sang it “at Emerson’s Opera House for twenty-one nights with great success.”<sup>35</sup>

Captain Jack was well aware that on the military frontier, man’s best friend often was his rifle. In after years he acknowledged this relationship in a steely song of love to his sweetheart’s lethal qualities:

Come, dear one, fling  
 Thy moody silence off, and lift thy voice  
 In song as in the days now gone forever;  
 For all the dangers past let us rejoice,  
 I’ll beat the time with thy quick-acting lever.  
 Sing in thy wildest tones, let not a note  
 Be soft as note from tender woman,  
 Sing as thou didst when from thy fiery throat  
 We hurled defiance at a foe inhuman.  
 Sing, sweetheart, sing!<sup>36</sup>

The language of this invocation is far different from the frontiersman’s unpolished grammar which is so character-

<sup>34</sup> Crawford, *Poet Scout*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> J. W. Crawford, *The Broncho Book* (Aurora, 1908), pp. 138-40.



General George Crook astride a saddle mule.



Captain J. W. (Jack) Crawford, the poet-scout.

istic of most of Crawford's poetry. It is closer to his most famous—and perhaps his best—lines, the epitaph on his friend Wild Bill Hickok, composed in 1876 at the end of the summer campaign.

Sleep on, brave heart, in peaceful slumber  
 Bravest scout in all the West;  
 Lightning eyes and voice of thunder,  
 Closed and hushed in quiet rest.  
 Peace and rest at last is given  
 May we meet again in heaven.  
 Rest in peace.<sup>37</sup>

The 1880's brought a resumption of Indian war, this time in the Southwest. Hostilities began at Cibicu Creek, Arizona, with an Apache attack upon a column led by General Carr. Once again an Indian campaign produced its poetry. A trooper in the Sixth Cavalry told the story of this first desperate encounter in a ballad of uncertain meter but sincere intent, which began:

Brave General Carr commanded  
 Well and true  
 The troops who fought in blue  
 On August thirtieth, 'eighty-one,  
 'Twas on the Cibicu.<sup>38</sup>

As the campaign broadened, other troopers composed new verses to the tune of "The Regular Army, O," describing the perils of Apache warfare:

We wint to Arizona  
 for to fight the Injuns there;  
 We came near being made bald-headed,  
 but they never got our hair.<sup>39</sup>

By 1885, the last of the hostile Apaches—Geronimo and his tiny band of warriors—had agreed to submit to the United States government, ending the long series of wars in the Southwest.

Five years later, however, the northern Plains were shaken by the final sizeable Indian uprising in the American West. In a last pathetic gesture towards their van-

<sup>37</sup> Crawford, *Poet Scout*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> *Washington Post*, January 6, 1907.

<sup>39</sup> Don Rickey, *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay* (Norman, 1963), p. 189.

ished independence, the Sioux had begun practicing the strange combination of Christianity and Indian lore known as the "Ghost Dance religion." The Indian messiah Wovoka engendered a fanatic belief that the white man could be driven from the continent forever. As panic spread throughout Nebraska, the Dakotas and Wyoming, the Army was sent once more into the field.

Pvt. W. H. Prather of the Ninth Cavalry—a crack Negro regiment—commemorated the mid-winter campaign with a ballad entitled "The Indian Ghost Dance and War," which began:

The Red Skins left their Agency, the soldiers left their  
Post,  
All on the strength of an Indian tale about Messiah's  
ghost  
Got up by savage chieftains to lead their tribes astray;  
But Uncle Sam wouldn't have it, for he ain't built that  
way.  
They swore that this Messiah came to them in vision's  
sleep,  
And promised to restore their game and buffaloes a  
heap,  
So they must start a big ghost dance, then all would  
join their band,  
And may be so we lead the way into the great Bad  
Land.<sup>40</sup>

There were many in the ranks who were apprehensive about facing the chieftain—Sitting Bull—who had defeated Custer; over four decades later one veteran of the Ghost Dance War could still recall "our theme song":

Boys stay at home  
Stay at home if you can  
Stay away from that city  
That's known as Cheyenne  
For Sitting Bull's there  
Also wild Commanche Bill  
And he'll surely lift your scalp  
In the dreary Black Hills  
And still we kept marching  
To the dreary Black Hills.<sup>41</sup>

But the uprising was doomed to fail before it began; the most important conflict, at Wounded Knee, South Dakota,

<sup>40</sup> Downey, *Indian-Fighting Army*, p. 271.

<sup>41</sup> James E. Wilson in *Winners of the West*, X, 3 (February 28, 1933), p. 4.

was a bloody humiliation for the Indians. After the surrender of the Sioux, and before the Army expedition disbanded, one last review was held. Although the soldiers perhaps could not have known it, the review was in fact the last great muster for the military frontier.

Its reason for existence gone with the end of the Indian wars, the soldier's West began to pass quietly away. One after another, the western posts were closed and their garrisons followed the guidon off into history. It was a colorful era and it had produced colorful poetry. Four decades after it had disappeared, the military frontier still provided historian E. A. Brininstool a subject for nostalgic poetry in the old-fashioned style. In a reflective mood, Brininstool in "The Phantom Riders" attempted to summon the spirits of the old soldiers once again out of the mists of time. An excerpt might serve well as a valedictory on the military frontier:

Out of a phantom silence, like shadows beyond the veil  
A ghostly legion goes riding adown a dust-strewn  
trail!

\* \* \* \* \*

Custer, Terry and Gibbon, MacKenzie, Carr and Crook,  
Sully, Benteen and Reno, Reynolds, Merritt and  
Cooke;

\* \* \* \* \*

Guidons fluttering bravely, they ride away in the night,  
And into the long lone silence they vanish beyond  
my sight!

From the buttes of old Montana and south to the border  
stream,  
I see them ride—as they used to ride—in an eerie,  
misty dream!

Grizzled old vets of battle, to conquer a dusky foe,  
Riding again in the Prairie-Land they rode in the  
Long-Ago!<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> E. A. Brininstool in *Winners of the West*, XIII, 1 (December 30, 1935), p. 1.