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Article Summary: While historical literature has frequently pictured the westward movement as the achievement of ambitious, restless individuals, the United States government actively guided, directed and protected the movement. The services rendered by the Army...the Department of the Platte, were varied and numerous.

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Photographs / Images: General George Crook, third commander of the Department of the Platte; Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, established in 1867 on the North Platte River, where the Bozeman Trail left the river and turned north; Senator Phineas W Hitchcock who proposed a settler relief bill, such relief to be administered by the Department of the Platte; red brick officers' quarters residence at Fort Omaha, built in 1878 and still standing; General Grenville M Dodge



General George Crook, an experienced Indian fighter in the 1850's and Civil War cavalry leader, became the third commander of the Department of the Platte (1875-1878). He earned the reputation of being the Army's most successful adversary of the Plains Indians, who called him the "gray fox." Mules were frequent mounts of cavalrymen because of their endurance.

THE DEPARTMENT OF THE PLATTE AND WESTERN SETTLEMENT, 1866—1877

By RICHARD GUENTZEL

Historical literature has frequently pictured the westward movement as the achievement of ambitious, restless individuals. Such a viewpoint has often obscured the fact that the United States government actively guided, directed, and protected the movement.

The services rendered by the Army, in this instance the Department of the Platte, were varied and numerous — the encouragement, maintenance, and sustenance of western emigration. It protected mail routes, telegraph lines, stages, freighters, survey parties, railway construction crews, government property and officials, exploration and scouting expeditions, pioneer settlements, and emigrant routes; it surveyed routes and built roads and bridges; it established law and order on the fringe of organized society; it bolstered the local economy through supply purchases; it afforded relief to destitute settlers; it maintained peace on the Indian reservations; and finally it fought the Indian wars necessary to bring peace to the western frontier.¹ However, Army posts were more than military centers. They were pioneers in industry and culture as well as in priority of occupation. "The frontier posts were an epitome of the entire civilization that was to follow. The army not only protected American civilization; it was itself a part of that civilization."²

To facilitate the fulfillment of its obligations, the Army created military departments or districts. In 1866 the Military Division of the Mississippi with its three departments encompassed the entire area between the great river and the Rocky

Mountains. The division commander, Lieutenant General William T. Sherman, recognized the unwieldy nature of large departments and asked for their reduction. In compliance with orders issued by the adjutant general's office on March 5, 1866, the Department of the Missouri was subdivided to form the Department of the Platte. This department included Minnesota and Iowa, the territory of Montana, and so much of the territories of Nebraska and Dakota as lay north of the Platte River.³ Major General Philip St. George Cooke, a veteran of western campaigns, was named department commander with headquarters in Omaha.

Successive department commanders were Christopher D. Augur, January 23, 1867, to December 11, 1871; E. O. C. Ord from the latter date to April 27, 1875; and George Crook through 1878.⁴

In August, 1866, the need for greater efficiency in the West resulted in a further realignment of the Division of the Missouri (the former Division of the Mississippi) with the establishment of the three departments: Arkansas, Platte, and Dakota.⁵ Under the new revision, the Department of the Platte embraced Iowa, the territories of Nebraska and Utah, "so much of Dakota as lies west of the 104th meridian, and so much of Montana as lies contiguous to the new road from Fort Laramie to Virginia City, Montana."⁶ This area generally remained the geographic limits of the department between 1866-1877.

These limits contained the Union Pacific Railroad from Omaha to Salt Lake City; the overland mail route from North Platte, via Denver, to Salt Lake City; the overland emigrant roads between the same points; the route to Montana known as the Powder River route; and numerous settlements in the states and territories.⁷

The inherent problems of the western Army in performing its numerous duties over a vast extent of land were complicated by a number of factors. Congress was in an economy mood after the Civil War. Its military policy was to support the Army at minimum strength to fulfill only minimum missions. Accordingly, Army strength in 1874 was set at 2,161 commissioned officers and 25,000 enlisted men.⁸ A nation "at peace" convinced itself that there was no war, and that Army requests for additional troops were exorbitant. Through these years General

Sherman tried to preserve the Army from the "scalping knives of Congressional braves who were out to make coups by cutting taxes through military reduction." At the same time he tried to satisfy the settlers who spread rapidly over the interior and demanded protection he could not supply.⁹

The scarcity of troops resulted in the condemnation of the Army. The standard Army reply to requests for "perfect protection" was that no troops were available but that they would be sent soon. Many Westerners, however, fully understood the Army's predicament. The *Omaha Weekly Herald* in an editorial entitled, "The Reduction of the Army," noted that the people "cheerfully" supported the economy but those in danger of Indian raids "fully" agreed that economy should be practiced in other departments.¹⁰

While a study of Army posts and personnel indicates the importance of the Army on the frontier between 1866-1877, it also reveals the general lack of troops. In 1867 the frontier had 116 posts with total garrisons of 24,598 troops, an average of 212 men per post.¹¹ At the close of 1870, the 111 posts on the frontier had garrisons totaling 22,789, an average of 205 men per post.¹² The Department of the Platte fared better than the average in those years. In 1867 the department contained fourteen posts with an authorized strength of 3,455, an average of 247 men per post.¹³ The same number of posts were authorized a strength of 3,951 troops in 1870, an average of 282 soldiers per post.¹⁴ Despite the higher than average number of troops, the vast Department of the Platte was still too far understrength to provide the necessary "perfect protection." The great distances involved, the high costs of transportation, the scattered nature of the settlements, and the large number of Indians made it mandatory that a definitive policy be formulated for the plains frontier.

This policy was outlined by General Sherman in 1866 to his department commanders. Since his forces were small and the demand upon them large, he could not hope to guard every danger point but only keep open the main travel routes. The method he chose to employ was that of penetration, using well-guarded roads as wedges into the great block of territory. The settlers were to move west as far as they could farm profitably. But beyond that line, travel through Indian country was fun-

neled into two or three principal routes. All other avenues were temporarily closed. By constructing posts along the emigrant roads and by spreading out the available men, the Army could provide relative safety for the travelers. The two major highways chosen were the Missouri River route and Platte Valley route. The significance of the latter was particularly emphasized by General Sherman to General Cooke, the commander of the Department of the Platte. Not only would it carry an immense amount of emigrant traffic, but it was also the route of the Union Pacific Railroad. Since military success on the plains revolved around the problem of supply, the railroad was to be given every possible protection. In addition to supply, it was hoped that the railroad would encourage emigration and divide the Indian nations, thereby aiding in the settlement of the difficult Indian question.¹⁵ This policy, of course, was never completely implemented nor was it done without criticism. The American in search of land and wealth always felt he had the right to travel and settle anywhere.

In accordance with the policy of penetration, Sherman instructed his department commanders to extend the railroads "as much military protection and assistance as the troops could spare consistent with their other heavy and important duties." The two railroads — the "Omaha Pacific" and "Kansas Pacific," as Sherman differentiated them — were the prime objects of protection. Not only did they aid the Army by rapidly transporting troops and stores over a desolate land, but the states and territories to the west were dependent upon them for supplies. Sherman commented:

When these two great thoroughfares reach the base of the Rocky Mountains, and when the Indian title to roam at will over the country lying between them is extinguished, then the solution of this most complicated question of Indian hostilities will be comparatively easy, for this belt of country will naturally fill up with our own people, who will permanently separate the hostile Indians of the north from those of the south, and allow us to direct our military forces on one or the other at pleasure.¹⁶

General Augur, commander of the Department of the Platte, seconded Sherman's summary. In addition to noting the saving of time and money in the transportation of troops and supplies, he deemed the railroad's completion, in its effect upon Indian affairs, "as equivalent to a successful campaign."¹⁷

But until the time of the railroad's completion, it was the task of General Augur and the soldiers of the Department of the

Platte to escort railroad engineers and commissioners, to protect grading and working parties, and to afford security to the railroad depots located about every twenty miles along the line. To effect this protection, General Augur employed detachments of infantry at "every railroad station between Fort Kearny and Cheyenne" and as escorts for the trains themselves. At the same time regular cavalry units and Pawnee scouts were sent to patrol and scout along the road. This method was so effective that General Augur reported the road "entirely exempt from interference by Indians" in 1869.¹⁸

However, the Army was never able to afford "perfect protection." General Grenville M. Dodge, the chief engineer of the Union Pacific Railroad, and his subordinates besieged the department and post commanders with requests for troops. The following letters and telegrams are typical.

Our men are fourth [*sic*] hundred beyond north Platte are leaving on account of Indians. Cannot you Send a few troops from Sedgwick . . . until we can get Grading out of way we cannot hold men . . . longer without them.¹⁹

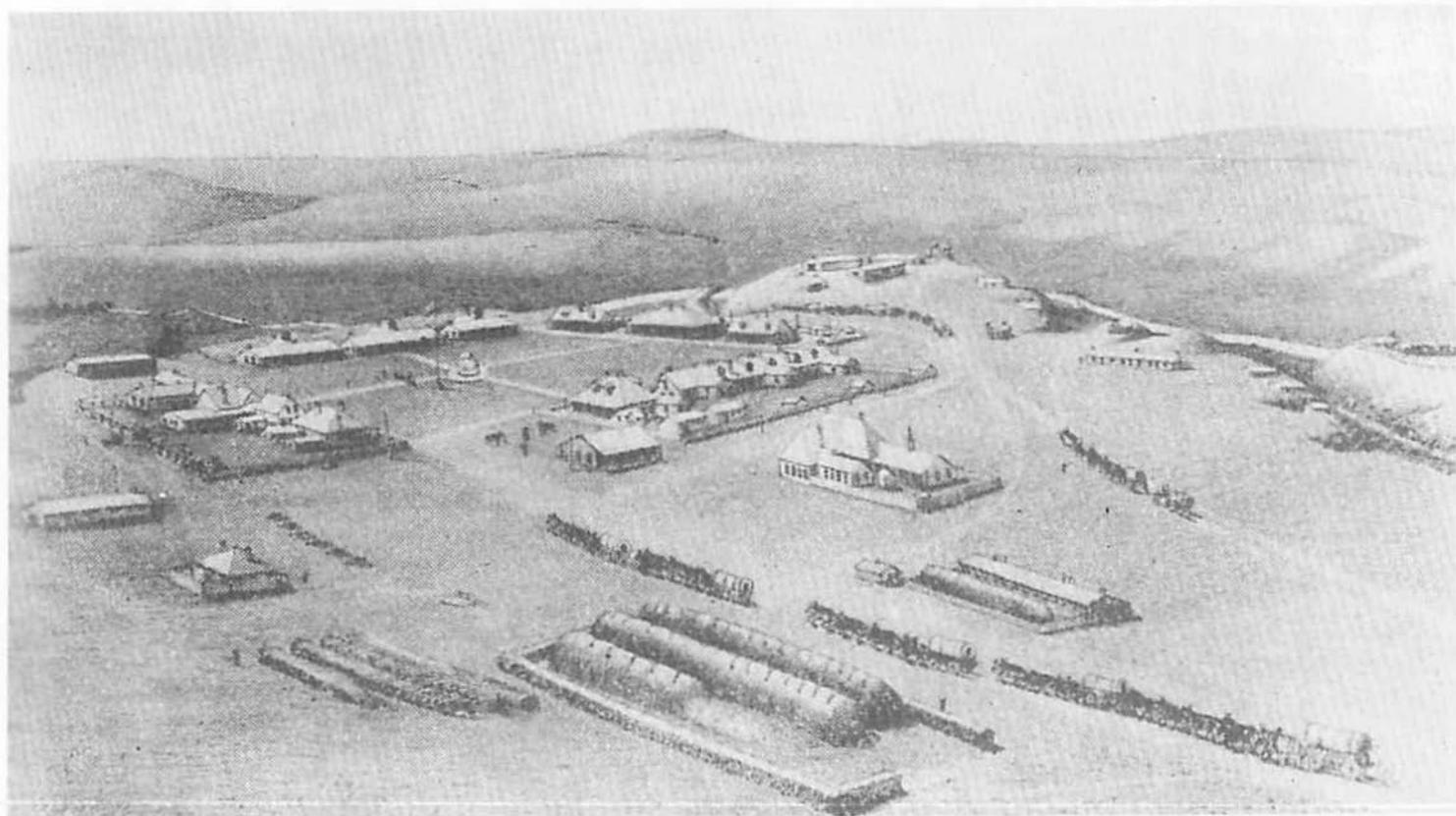
The country between the two (2) Plattes, is full of these bands, they strike us some point daily. The company of cavalry at Sedgwick ought to scout this country. The Infantry can do nothing. . . . Indians are fully aware of our unprotected condition, and will take full advantage of it. Two (2) companies of cavalry from North Platte to Utah, is certainly little protection.²⁰

When will the additional company designed for protection of road get to Sedgwick? We used a company fifteen (15) miles this side of Sedgwick. I also want a detachment of (20) men to follow our Engineers about three (3) miles in advance of track, and protect them and men putting up our Bridges.²¹

Please hurry to protect workmen in Black Hills. Indians attacked Heill's party, and killed Mr. Heill and wounded Mr. Archer.²²

The Army commanders usually responded to these demands as rapidly as circumstances would permit. Nevertheless, many post commanders complained to their superiors about the lack of troops. Brigadier General Joseph H. Potter at Fort Sedgwick, for example, wrote that he had exhausted his infantry; yet, Dodge reported that he barely had enough men to guard the stores with more trains enroute. As a result, Potter had but two companies to cover fifty miles, and workmen refused to go out without adequate protection.²³ The alternative was to issue arms to railroad workers. It was felt that "properly armed and reasonably vigilant" they could protect themselves.²⁴

A number of officers who were critical of the policy pre-



Fort Fetterman, Wyoming, was established in 1867 on the North Platte River in July, 1867, at a point where the Bozeman Trail left the river and turned north. It was intended to protect the immigrant routes of the area from the Sioux. (Drawing from Covant's History of Wyoming)

ferred the latter course of action. Colonel John K. Mizner at Fort McPherson felt workmen could protect themselves and that the detailing of so many small units was destructive of discipline, interfered with instruction, and delayed the improvement of the post. Moreover, he had been informed by the engineers and contractors on the road that the guard at one bridge was unnecessary, but that it gave confidence to the workmen.²⁵ In reference to migrating Indians, Augur best summarized the psychological importance of Army protection.

Though perhaps with no hostile intent, the mere fact such parties are in the vicinity alarms and demoralizes employes, and embarrasses the entire management of the road. What troops have to do, then, is not only be in a position and condition to repel any actual attack upon the road, but they must be distributed in such a way as to give a sense of security to employes.²⁶

Other assistance rendered the railroad by the department was the right to procure timber within the military reserve and use reservation ground for depots.²⁷ But it was the protection of the "great railroad from Omaha to San Francisco" that General Augur regarded as the "most important object to be accomplished" by his troops.²⁸ The fact that the U.P. completed 266 miles of track in 1866, 240 in 1867, and 425 in 1868, attested to the proficiency of the Department of the Platte. In the latter year Sherman commended Augur:

I think you can take just comfort in the fact that under your care the Pacific Railroad has met so little difficulty that they actually built over 400 miles without interruption and had only one actual break by Indians.²⁹

While the Union Pacific projected itself across the plains, thousands of emigrants made their way across the area by the more conventional wagon train. It was also the Army's duty to protect these travelers against Indians. To perform this task Army commanders established a rigid code for Plains travel. Adherence to the code usually resulted in a safe journey, but emigrants were seldom known for obedience to rules.

Emigrant and freight trains were forced to unite for protection. Commanders at the military posts in Indian country required all trains to be properly organized and sufficiently armed before they were allowed to cross. General John Pope's order of February 28, 1866, prohibited the passage of trains of less than twenty wagons and thirty armed men into Indian country. Smaller parties were held at the nearest post until others came up or until a military escort was arranged.³⁰

The Pope stipulations caused complaints among emigrants, who argued that the scarcity of grass and water made it impractical to move the larger numbers of animals involved.³¹ Due to the lateness of season or restlessness, some small trains were willing to assume the risks and appealed to the department commander.³² The Army did not follow the rules closely, however, and small parties under military orders were often sent out without sufficient armament. As a result post officers were besieged with requests for arms, ammunition, and escorts they were unable to provide. Colonel Mizner at Fort McPherson recommended that notice be given that wagon trains would not be allowed west of Fort Kearny without a full supply of arms and ammunition.³³ The *Omaha Weekly Herald* happily published General Augur's 1867 order relating to overland transit and to the protection of main travel routes. It hailed the "prompt and vigorous measures" taken for protecting the lives and property of those "who populate the West and create the important commerce of the plains."³⁴

Because the Army's travel code was generally effective in 1866, General Sherman, commander of the Division of the Missouri, resolved to vigorously apply it to the following season. Of the four principal routes open for travel in 1867, the Platte Valley handled 90 percent of the travel to Montana, Utah, California, and Colorado, and was heavily defended, as was its branch leading from Fort Laramie to the Yellowstone.³⁵ The latter route, known as the Powder River Road or Bozeman Trail, was a source of particular difficulty to the Army. The growth of settlement in Montana and the subsequent demand for better transportation forced the Army to survey the route in 1865. During the summer of 1866, the Army built three posts — Fort Reno, Fort Philip Kearny, and Fort C. F. Smith — to secure the road. The work parties were under almost constant attack, and the posts were in a virtual state of siege as the Sioux resisted without quarter.³⁶ Nevertheless, the settlers and newspapers hailed the opening with great confidence.

The purpose of the Government is to open this Route, and to keep it open, let it cost what it may. General Augur is already making the military dispositions under which life and property are to be made secure over its whole extent, and the commercial necessities demanding it — the rapidly growing interests of Montana — the impetus which events are giving to mineral discovery and development — the swelling tide of emigration westward — and, not least, the interests of this State will unite to make it the great thoroughfare to the golden Territory.³⁷

The same paper on March 15, 1867, suggested that General Augur would take the field in person to guarantee that the route was efficiently guarded. But the scarcity of troops, the tenacity of the Indians, and the foolhardiness of the travelers made the task all but impossible. Colonel Henry Carrington reported he had only eight infantry companies to guard the road from the Platte to Virginia City, Montana, that the emigrants were insufficiently armed, and that a "false security" had resulted in emigrant trains straggling and "involving danger to themselves and others."³⁸

Finally, in 1868 the Bozeman Trail was closed when the Indian Peace Commission agreed to its abandonment as a condition of peace with the Sioux. Moreover, the westward extension of the Union Pacific Railroad made the trail less important as better and more secure roads developed west of the mountains. On March 2, 1868, General Grant ordered the breakup of Forts Reno, Philip Kearny, and C. F. Smith,³⁹ and the abandonment of the road.⁴⁰

Although the Army had failed to keep the Bozeman road open, stories of depredations and hostilities were exaggerated. General Sherman denounced the "inventions and exaggerations" which damaged the business of the roads and seriously checked emigration to the mountain territories.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the emigration statistics collected by the Department of the Platte indicated a large wave of emigration. In 1867, 3,074 wagons passed through the department carrying 5,730 men, women, and children.⁴² The following year 2,896 wagons transported 6,213 people.⁴³ Although the department could not provide "perfect protection" along the emigrant trails, it did supply enough to continue the westward migration.

As the Army endeavored to secure the highways of the West, it also labored to maintain transcontinental telegraph and mail lines which were significant not only to the Army but to the whole nation. The method of protecting stage lines in hostile territory consisted of posting small squads at every station to ride as guards atop coaches. This system was used when troops did not have mounts. Commonly each coach escort consisted of four men from the eight men assigned to each post; four were at the station at all times. Troops at the station guarded the stock of the stage company from Indian marauders. When company

stock was driven off by the Indians or when stations were destroyed, stages loaded with the U.S. mail were drawn by cavalry horses and troops became stage drivers.⁴⁴ General Augur reported in 1867 that the overland mail stages required guards at their stations between Julesburg and Denver, and between Forts Sanders and Bridger; guards for coaches were also required.⁴⁵

On one occasion a general agent telegraphed headquarters for thirty additional soldiers to protect mail coaches and company workers. He urged prompt compliance since it would be "almost ruinous to have another interruption of our Stages and to lose the present opportunity of getting our hay put up."⁴⁶

It was impossible for the Army to guard every telegraph pole along the line to the Pacific, but assistance was given. Escorts were furnished for repair men and often the troops dug holes, hauled poles, and repaired wire. The telegraph followed the North Platte while the stage line followed the Lodge Pole Creek-Bridger Pass route, thus forcing the Army to guard two lines through hostile country.⁴⁷ The importance of the Army in protecting the telegraph is shown by the repeated pleas to the Department of the Platte for assistance. The superintendent of the Western Union Telegraph Company actually asked the Army in 1868 to postpone the abandonment of Fort Morgan until a line could be strung from Sedgwick to Cheyenne.⁴⁸

A more difficult problem to the Army was the protection of pioneer settlements. Since settlement on the Great Plains was widely dispersed, an already overburdened and undermanned Army was forced to further extend itself. General Sherman complained in 1868 that people continued to settle on the exposed points of the frontier, to travel without necessary precautions, and to "run after every wild report of the discovery of gold . . . thus coming into daily conflict with discontented and hostile Indians." In addition the government continued to extend the surveys westward and to grant patents to occupants, to build roads, and to establish mail routes as though the country were at peace. He further noted that over these matters the military had no control, yet their public nature implied protection, and the military was "daily and hourly called on for guards and escorts . . . without the privilege of advising or being consulted beforehand."⁴⁹

General Ord of the Department of the Platte indicated the scattered nature of these settlements when he reported:

*Senator Phineas W. Hitchcock's
bill for relief of suffering settlers
was administered by the
Department of the Platte.*



There are five extensive frontiers to guard in this department: the east and west of the Great Utah Valley . . . ; then coming east are the settlements which are advancing west up the tributaries of the Missouri are reached. Besides these, there is a line of settlements and small towns along the Union Pacific Railroad, and all of these are more or less sensitive in proportion to the scanty numbers of settlers and their remoteness.

In Southeastern Utah, Wind River Valley, along up the Republican and Loup Fork, and on the streams near the North Platte, heading in the Black Hills, the settler's nearest neighbor is sometimes eight, ten, or twenty miles distant.⁵⁰

A study of one area of the department's command — Nebraska — exemplifies the close relationship between Army, settler, and Indian. Although the Sioux had been placed on a reservation well north of the Platte east of the Black Hills, they claimed the right to hunt in the Republican River country, south of the Platte, by virtue of the Treaty of 1868. As settlers moved into the area, they demanded that the Army remove the Indians. During the summer, therefore, the Army patrolled the railroad and settlements directing the roving Indians to prevent depredations and bolster public confidence. The matter was further complicated by the over five thousand settlers who had taken up surveyed lands under the Homestead Act but were discovered on the reservation created by the earlier treaty.⁵¹

In the autumn of 1867 some Nebraska communities asked permission to raise companies for defense and requested the Army to furnish weapons.⁵² The following spring citizens petitioned Senator John M. Thayer to demand government protection, which had been denied them for three years. "We are,"

they stated, "compelled to leave our houses, and land with our crops standing in the field, and when asking for protection, we are told that the government is unable at the present time to do anything."⁵³ One indignant resident of Columbus wrote that General Augur's only advice was "to let the *dear* Indians alone, as they are on a legitimate errand – stealing." Then in language reminiscent of the frontier he boasted:

We here as American citizens have by this time learned – that to expect any protection from the Government to which we pay all we can earn, to keep up those military gents would be worse than folly, and therefore take the matter in our own hands to save ourselves and our property, the General's advice to the contrary, notwithstanding.

The *Herald* in the same issue chided the letter-writer for disrespectful language and acknowledged that General Augur had done all in his power to protect the people.⁵⁴

In his annual report Augur wrote that the governor of Nebraska had applied personally for protection of the settlement on the Little Blue River. Since Indian depredations the year before had caused many settlers to leave, he had ordered a company of cavalry to encamp along the river during the entire season, and noted that "no attempt has been made by the Indians thus far to interfere with the inhabitants."⁵⁵

A patrol of this expedition took exception to the settlers' demands and pleas:

I think there are not more than twenty actual residents – men and women – on the Little Blue. Nearly all of them are related to each other . . . and it is a rather close corporation, which is represented by Mr. Alexander.

These people do not themselves expect any new residents this Summer, but talk vaguely about a large settlement sometime in the future. The land is nearly all taken up by non-resident Speculators . . . and in my judgment, there will not be any considerable addition to the population for several years. In fact, I think the importance of the Little Blue Valley has been much over-estimated. . . .

The people of Big Sandy are very much alarmed about the Indians, though the Indians have never really violated that settlement. They are delighted at the presence of the troops – and have good reason to be, for the Company probably spent more money there in the two days of our encampment, than was [spent] in the whole settlement before. Butter raised ten cents a pound the Second day!⁵⁶

Even so, Governor David Butler requested troops for Big Sandy Creek and Little Blue again the next year (1869). His message emphasized the excellent crop prospects, the Indian menace, and the "incalculable" damage to the immigration interests.⁵⁷ In response General Augur issued "sufficient arms and ammunition" for a company of citizens to protect the settlements on the Little Blue.⁵⁸ The following year Augur

resolved to send a cavalry patrol to that vicinity as soon as the grass would subsist the animals. Accordingly, Captain E. J. Spaulding was sent on April 4, 1870, with instructions to consult with Governor Butler and to proceed to the frontier settlements. As a consequence of his actions the settlements filled up and extended "very sensibly."⁵⁹

This endless round of requests, petitions, and Army responses could be found in most areas of Nebraska during this period, especially in troubled northwestern Nebraska. But in addition to arming citizens and sending out patrols, the department sought to quell the Indians and to quiet the whites by constructing new posts. General Ord requested in 1872 an appropriation of thirty thousand dollars to build a two-company post on the upper Republican River, "where rapidly advancing settlements are pushing out, and where the Indians go in large numbers annually to hunt."⁶⁰ In 1873 Ord called attention to the exposed condition of Nebraska north of the Union Pacific Railroad. He deemed the area rich, but felt that Indian fears retarded its settlement. Therefore, he urged the construction of a fifty thousand dollar fort in the area to give a sense of security to the newcomers and to encourage permanent settlement as a step toward developing the country.⁶¹

The psychological significance of Army protection was demonstrated at the Winnebago Agency in 1870. In that year a farmer who resided near the agency was found murdered in his field. The resultant alarm caused a mass exodus of settlers. A detachment of infantry was sent "to give a sense of security" to the alarmed inhabitants. "This was happily accomplished," reported General Augur. "Those who had fled in alarm returned, and the settlement was saved."⁶²

In 1871 General Augur announced that no whites had been killed by Indians within the military department during the year. As a result of this "exceptional condition" frontier settlements were strengthened and extended, new portions of the country explored, new mines discovered and worked, and an unprecedented increase of immigration had followed. "In this State [Nebraska] alone," he added, "40,000 have settled within its limits since the 1st of April last."⁶³ Although the Army alone was not responsible for these events, its policy of emigrant protection certainly played an important role. Moreover,

a period of peace and immigration helped the Army to ultimately settle its Indian problem on the western frontier.

An element more unpredictable and more difficult to protect than the pioneer farmer was the miner, who literally leaped beyond the pale of civilization. The opening and working of the mines in the Sweetwater country had established a remote point in the Department of the Platte exposed to Indian depredations and difficult to protect. Augur in 1869 saw no other way of affording protection than to establish a post in the vicinity.⁶⁴ As a consequence of further Indian raids, a permanent post was built in 1870 to help develop the mining capacity of the district.⁶⁵ The rapid discovery of valuable mineral resources in the mountains of southern Utah, remote from all settlements, compelled General Ord to adopt a similar policy in 1872.⁶⁶

Perhaps the most calamitous event from a military standpoint was the discovery of gold in the Black Hills. The discovery excited the restless or rootless portion of the population in the department in 1874, and optimistic prospectors prepared to invade the Indian country, which by existing treaty the government was pledged to keep the whites from entering. It became the Army's unpleasant task to curb the miners and to preserve the Indian reservation. General Ord felt it was "indispensable" to establish two posts near the east line of Wyoming and the north line of Nebraska, and to patrol the Black Hills and the routes leading to them. The alternative was Indian warfare.⁶⁷

The difficulties inherent in stopping a mass migration were highlighted in a dispatch received from Camp Robinson in December, 1874. The patrols engaged in curbing the miners experienced untold suffering and privation in the winter months.⁶⁸ The secretary of war cited in 1875 a message from the department commander which stated that trouble was certain unless something was done to obtain possession of the Black Hills for the miners. "Under instructions from the Department," the secretary added, "the utmost vigilance has been exercised to keep all unauthorized persons from trespassing upon the reservation . . . with only partial success."⁶⁹ The insurmountable task and the lack of complete success led directly to the Sioux War of 1875-1876.

The conclusion of this war opened an era of general peace on the plains. The Army's role in the pacification of the Indians

and in the resultant western development were items of General Sheridan's annual report in 1878.

The frontier has been greatly advanced, and mineral and agricultural interests have been largely developed, while the cattle and sheep interests are assuming extraordinary proportions. The valley of the Yellowstone and the valleys along the base of the Bighorn Mountains are gradually opening up with settlements and mail routes. . . . The progress of the settlements and the increase of farming and grazing interests in Nebraska . . . has been very great, while the agricultural and mineral developments in Colorado, Utah, and Montana have more than kept pace with the healthy progress elsewhere noticed throughout this division.⁷⁰

The Department of the Platte, however, contributed in other ways to the progress of the West. Exploration and survey depended largely on the protection and assistance afforded by the Army. Parties sent out by General Augur in 1871 were typical: one was ordered to the Uintah Mountains of Utah to learn the character and extent of the valleys and their adaptation for cultivation or grazing; to determine the amount and location of timber, and the feasibility of getting it to the railroad; to find a practical road from Fort Bridger to the Uintah Indian Agency; and to explore the Green River country for mineral deposits. About the same time another party was sent to examine the Seminole mountain range. Their discovery of large deposits of gold and silver "attracted to these mountains quite a large mining population, who are now successfully working a number of leads."⁷¹

New routes to the West and the improvement of the routes already in use were of special interest to the government. Constructing military roads became a primary Army function — chiefly of the Army engineers. The Army furnished escorts to protect the engineers and the laborers engaged in the work. The subject of a bridge at Fort Kearny was long discussed and frequently brought to the attention of military authorities. When construction actually commenced in 1866, the *Herald* welcomed it as an improvement "demanded by the interests of the Government and the people."⁷² In 1874 General Ord sent a party from Sidney to locate a better route to the Sioux agencies on White River. The route surveyed was sixty miles shorter than by way of Cheyenne but needed "a good bridge over the North Platte River." Since the bridge would be of value to the Indian Department, as well as to the military, he recommended a congressional appropriation of thirty thousand dollars for its construction.⁷³

The department was frequently requested to provide escorts for public and private exploration parties. The Interior Department referred a Mr. Blackendorfer to the command with a request for an escort to make an examination of the Rocky Mountains. He asked for two companies of cavalry, a rather exorbitant demand under the grave circumstances of 1867.⁷⁴ The report of one such party redounded to the Army's disadvantage when in May, 1875, six companies of cavalry and two of infantry escorted a geological party to the Black Hills. A telegram dated June 22, 1875, reported "the discovery of gold in paying quantities,"⁷⁵ and the flag followed the miners.

The surveyors of the public land also petitioned for protection of the Army. Exposed not only to the hardships of the frontier but also to the raids of Indians, their pleas were honored as best the Army could. General Augur, commanding the Department of the Platte, reported in 1869:

I have had many applications from surveyors of public lands for escorts to enable them to fill their contracts, and I have furnished them in all cases where it was possible for me to do so. I have in other cases issued them arms and ammunition, under proper guarantees for the return of the arms.⁷⁶

In the spring of 1868 the surveyor general notified the department commander that seasonal operations were about to begin. He asked if the Army could supply arms for surveyors and provide them with a strong detachment of Pawnee scouts. Although regular Army troops provided security the previous year, the surveyor general felt they had actually hindered the "rapid execution" of the work; therefore, he asked for the Pawnee Scouts instead.⁷⁷ The scarcity of troops the prior year had forced the Army to send infantry rather than cavalry units. The military, nevertheless, had always attempted to meet this important obligation.

In 1867 the headquarters of the Department of the Platte issued duplicate orders to effect civil order over mushrooming settlements along the railroad. Commanders were instructed to assume such control over the inhabitants as necessary to preserve order and to protect public and private property in the absence of civil law. Until civil authorities established courts and secured the legal rights of public corporations, the Army protected the legal rights of the Union Pacific Railroad from infringements and secured its property from illegal seizure and occupation. Army officers were cautioned, however, to exercise



Built prior to 1878, this red brick officers' quarters residence at Fort Omaha is still standing. (Photo, 1953, by the National Park Service)

discretion so as to avoid the "appearance of an assumption by the military of an improper control or exercise of authority over citizens." General Augur commented that the military power in this respect was limited to confining offenders or sending them out of the country. "It is a very delicate and unpleasant duty," he stated, "and one from which we would gladly be relieved by the establishment and enforcement of civil laws."⁷⁸

General Augur, however, did not enjoy the luxury of civil order for some time. Post commanders requested instructions on such diverse matters as prisoner confinement, trials for known killers, and liquor seizure. One officer even threatened to take control of Julesburg when rival political factions threatened violence.⁷⁹ On the other hand, railroad officials besieged him with requests for troop assistance, mainly to remove illegal squatters from railroad lands or to maintain order in time of strike. In 1871 the general superintendent of the Union Pacific informed General Augur that coal miners at Carbon Station were on strike; that they not only refused to work themselves, but would not permit others to do so; and that they threatened

to destroy railroad property. The sheriff was also unable to enforce the law, and General Augur was forced to send infantry company to protect property, keep trains running, and preserve peace. The mere presence of federal troops quieted the populace.⁸⁰

The federal government often furnished Army support to the state and territorial governments in times of disorder. The threat of mob action and property damage frequently caused Utah officials to seek Army protection. General Philip H. Sheridan, commander of the Division of Missouri, on a visit to Camp Douglas at Salt Lake City, likened the post to "an American consulate in a foreign city — a place where persecuted Gentiles can take refuge and have protection under the American flag."⁸¹ While normally complying with the desires of civil authorities, General Ord once was forced to notify Governor Robert W. Furnas of Nebraska that the scarcity of troops prevented dispatching a "special party for the arrest of civil offenders."⁸²

Another duty forced upon the Army was to assist careless emigrants who, despite military advice, refused to take enough supplies or to eliminate unnecessary articles. Since the Army could not compel adherence to its instructions, it became the duty of its officers to insure some degree of safety for the stragglers and the destitute. The officers of the Department of the Platte were particularly active in this respect during the winter of 1872 when snow blocked the lines of transportation. Consolidated U.P. passenger and freight trains were stalled for months. As a consequence the railroad was forced to draw rations from military posts to supply its employees and passengers. At the same time the danger of famine among the miners of South Pass City was averted by the food stuffs from Camp Stambaugh. When a coal famine occurred at Cheyenne, the plight of the inhabitants was relieved from the surplus at Fort D. A. Russell.⁸³ The Army role in materially reducing the suffering along the trails was best summarized by General Irwin McDowell in 1864:

One of the principal benefits derived from many of our military stations on the line of emigration is to assist as well as to protect the worn-down and exhausted emigrants who come to make a return for help thus given by developing the wealth of the country of which the Government reaps the advantage.⁸⁴

One of the more graphic examples of army humanitarianism was the relief of grasshopper sufferers in Nebraska. In October,

1874, General Ord informed the adjutant general that Nebraskans had urged him to distribute rations and clothing among the destitute. Ord requested permission to send food, under the supervision of "reliable officers," to four seriously affected counties. The supplies would be issued "only on orders of organized county committees to those in danger of starvation." He also requested permission to use transportation for shipment of the relief supplies.⁸⁵

Although the reply from the War Department was generally negative, General Ord continued to dispatch supplies to needy settlers. Reports by officers returning from frontier duty were used by Ord to justify his course. General James Brisbin reported that nearly half the population was barefooted and nearly naked, that poverty and distress existed in all directions, and that not over "ten to twenty days rations" were found anywhere.⁸⁶ In private conversation the secretary of war had also informed Ord that a limited issue of rations might be made by post commanders to prevent actual starvation.⁸⁷ As chairman of the executive committee of the Nebraska Relief and Aid Association, moreover, General Ord was in a position to judge the insufficiency of private relief measures. He informed the *Herald* that the destitution was far greater than first supposed and that the resources of the society (private aid) were "altogether inadequate." It was estimated that seven to ten thousand destitute persons would have to be "provided for during the winter and furnished with seed in the spring."⁸⁸

Responding to Senator Phineas Hitchcock's request, General Ord took the opportunity to outline the state of affairs in Nebraska. In 1874 the State Aid Society supplied about nine thousand persons with bread rations at a cost of twelve thousand dollars per month — a rate beyond the resources of the group. The clothing problem had been temporarily solved by the arrival of private donations and by the distribution of damaged and unserviceable clothing from the department depot, but there was a need for more blankets, coats, and socks. Since interested promoters induced a larger number of settlers to remain in Nebraska, General Ord estimated that nine thousand people would require assistance until the next year's harvest.⁸⁹

When Congress passed Hitchcock's relief bill, the task of implementing its provisions fell upon the Army. Orders issued

by the Department of War in February, 1875, required the "enrollment" of all prospective recipients of government supplies.⁹⁰ The Department of the Platte reported eighteen officers were engaged in enrolling sufferers in Iowa and Nebraska and in distributing government clothing and rations between November, 1874, to May, 1875.⁹¹

Some complaints were registered against the Army's system of enrollment. One settler complained advance notice had not been given; hence the outlying districts had been unable to enroll. Property owners, who were denied assistance, complained about the lack of fair treatment.⁹² Some officers, however, were praised for their efforts: "The people in the districts most seriously affected comment favorably upon his labors [General Remick] in collecting the facts," reported the *Omaha Weekly Republican*.⁹³

The Army was the main federal agency distributing relief to grasshopper sufferers. According to the commissary general, supplies were given to 107,535 persons in the Departments of the Platte, Missouri, and Dakota. In Nebraska during March, 1875, rations were issued in forty-three counties to 13,421 adults and 9,142 children.⁹⁴

One of the more novel methods of providing food for the destitute was reported at Fort McPherson. A company of soldiers was sent to the Red Willow country for the purpose of hunting buffalo and distributing the meat to the needy. Destitute persons were urged to visit the camp where they would be given "a liberal supply of buffalo meat, not only for immediate wants, but to dry or salt down in the coming winter months."⁹⁵ But the government's contribution was not confined to food and clothing. In the construction of Fort Hartsuff on the Loup River, the War Department urged that jobs be thrown "into the hands of settlers and thus aid them in this manner." In effect Fort Hartsuff became a public relief project.⁹⁶

The primary task of the Army, of course, was to constrain the Indians within their large reservations and to punish those who violated their agreements. The performance of this duty necessitated protective measures for the emigrants which resulted in clashes with the Indians. Operations, in turn, were complicated by the "Peace Policy" of the Interior Department

and the acquisitiveness of land-hungry settlers. But aside from the repressive aspects of Indian policy, the Army played a positive, though indirect role, in the maintenance of Indian peace. It attempted to protect the Indians from white encroachments. An illustration of the latter was the Big Horn expedition of 1870. Leaders had promised General Augur that they would not enter the lands reserved for the Indians. But in violation of their pledge, whites entered the lands of the Shoshoni. When Augur learned of the broken promise, he sent cavalry in pursuit of the party. They found the expedition at the point of dissolution, and no harm was done.⁹⁷

The Army was often called upon to protect agents and government property on reservations. Temporary garrisons and escorts were furnished agents in time of disorder or threatened hostility. The Interior Department in 1874 asked for troop protection at the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies in northwest Nebraska. General Ord reported that the greater part of his command marched two hundred and fifty miles to the Spotted Tail agency, "but they reached their destination in time to protect the traders and agents there, and have maintained quiet since."⁹⁸

The Army also aided the Indians by issuing subsistence rations, which prevented starvation and reduced hostilities or depredations which resulted when the Indian had to choose between starving or stealing. While the Indian Bureau was directly responsible for the needy Indians, it frequently lacked the necessary supplies. For example, the Department of the Platte ordered the commanding officer at Fort Laramie to issue the Indian agent up to ten thousand rations "provided such amount can be spared from the supplies of the post."⁹⁹

General Sherman, in control of the Plains Indians in 1868, ordered commanders of the departments, districts, and posts to maintain peace on the frontier and appointed officers agents for the "Plains Indians." They afforded the Indians temporary support during removal of tribes to reservations, but no supplies were henceforth to be issued outside reservations except in emergency. The supplies issued were beef, cattle, meat, grain, bread, coffee, sugar, clothing, seed, and agricultural tools. General Augur, commanding the Department of the Platte, was

charged with making disbursements "affecting the Shoshones, Snakes, and kindred tribes." Subsistence of this type was furnished the tribes until June 30, 1870.¹⁰⁰ Army officers served still another function — as peace commissioners. The President directed General Augur to act as a member of the Indian Peace Commission at Fort Harker, Kansas, on October 8, 1867.¹⁰¹

The economic impact of the Department of the Platte on its settled area was reflected in the employment of civilian workers, public works, transportation expenses, and supply purchases. Civilians performed tasks unsuited to Army personnel and to alleviate the shortage of manpower, e.g., clerks, scouts, teamsters, and doctors. The following Red Cloud Agency post return was typical of most military posts:¹⁰²

Number	Q.M. Department	Compensation Monthly
3	Interpreters @ \$150.00	\$ 450.00
1	Blacksmith.	80.00
1	Carpenter (foreman)	75.00
4	Carpenters @ \$2.00 per day	240.00
1	Laborer (foreman)	45.00
1	Laborer @ \$1.00 per day.	30.00
		\$ 920.00

On one occasion an officer at Fort McPherson was obliged to dismiss fifty-one teamsters or civilian employees.¹⁰³ The largest employer of civilians was usually the quartermaster depot at Omaha. It had ninety-three civilian employees in 1867 and forty-five in 1869. The reduction in number brought a complaint that the remaining force was insufficient, that soldiers as a class were unskillful, and that a competent force of civilians was good economy.¹⁰⁴ In 1875 sixty-one men were employed by the Omaha depot in the following capacities: five clerks, one superintendent, one storekeeper, one assistant storekeeper, one foreman of laborers, one janitor, seven watchmen, sixteen laborers, one inspector of fuel and forage, two agents, one wagon master, one stable master, one blacksmith, one blacksmith's helper, one wheelwright, one packer, twelve teamsters, six hostlers, and one porter.¹⁰⁵

The importance of public works was mirrored in civilian employment, construction costs, and the intangible aspects of public benefit. From the annual appropriations of nearly \$130,000 for construction and repair of buildings in 1874-1875



General Grenville M. Dodge, chief engineer of the Union Pacific Railroad, was never able to get adequate protection for workers and trainmen.

and 1875-1876, the department spent \$229.63 in the former year and \$2,640.00 in the latter for bridge construction. During the same time period it spent \$1,148.45 and \$14,571.60 respectively at Fort Hartsuff¹⁰⁶ – the post designed as a public relief project. All these projects required the employment of civilian carpenters and sawyers. A project of uncertain nature was proposed by the commanding officer of Fort Laramie, Wyoming, in 1867. He was convinced that for a trifling cost the government could construct an irrigation canal to bring water “to the quarters and public buildings and to all the ground adjacent to this Post.”¹⁰⁷ Although the Army turned a deaf ear to such projects, the annual appropriations in excess of one hundred thousand dollars certainly provided money for the civilian population.

The development of railroad transportation in the Department of the Platte was of mutual benefit to both the Army and the railroad. The railroad solved to an extent the Army’s problem of distance on the plains, but at the same time the Army provided a lucrative source of revenue to the railroad. The following accounts submitted by the U.P. were forwarded for payment by the Department of the Platte to the quartermaster general in the years 1874, 1875, and 1876:¹⁰⁸

	1874	1875	1876
Troops	\$238,721.39	\$211,016.77	\$193,554.60
Freight	157,109.96	129,827.35	362,673.19
Express.	1,820.65	2,242.53	
Total	\$397,652.00	\$343,086.65	\$556,227.79

Another source of ready cash for the inhabitants of a military district was the purchase of military supplies. A number of items were purchased from the large markets of the East: clothing, blankets, and other quartermaster supplies. But large quantities of grain, vegetables, hay, lumber, wood, cattle, horses, and other commissary supplies were bought from the markets near the posts. The purchase of commissary stores near the points of consumption not only secured fresher supplies and lessened the expense of transportation but also built up frontier farming, trade, and even manufacturing. The depot for subsistence at Cheyenne, Wyoming, supplied forts D. A. Russell, Fetterman, and Laramie with fresh vegetables secured from the farmers in Colorado. Four hundred fifty thousand pounds of fresh vegetables were contracted for at Cheyenne at the following prices per pound: onions $4\frac{3}{4}$ cents, potatoes $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents, beets $2\frac{1}{4}$ cents, and turnips 2 cents. The common method for supplying fresh beef was to purchase the cattle on the hoof and to graze them until needed.¹⁰⁹

The records of the Department of the Platte are filled with requests and authorizations for the purchase of supplies. Those ranged from the purchase of three thousand pounds of salt in the open market at Camp Douglas, Utah, to the acquisition of beef cattle for the Sioux Expedition.¹¹⁰ The *Omaha Herald* in 1870 announced the opening of bids for supplies at the military posts of the department. The required items and amounts were: wood 19,015 cords, hay 7,506 tons, coal 7,787 tons, charcoal 26,500 bushels, straw 300 tons. There were one hundred and forty proposals, "the bidders coming principally from the localities where the supplies are to be furnished."¹¹¹ The depot quartermaster and chief commissary disbursed within the department \$297,127.12 and \$180,922.85 respectively in 1874¹¹² — this when the total budget of the Department of the Platte was \$1,296,967.34 for the year.¹¹³

The reaction of Omaha to the Department of the Platte also reveals the economic importance of the military to the frontier. News that the department headquarters and depots would be established at Omaha in April, 1866, was greeted with the banner headline "Great Good News." Omaha was "to be to the Northern garrisons what Leavenworth has been for so many years to both Northern and Southern." The *Herald* in 1868

congratulated Omaha and Nebraska upon the "vast local benefits" derived from the selection of Omaha as a permanent military depot. It explained:

The intention is to winter troops here engaged in service on the plains, and to make it the chief depot for the purchase, storage and re-shipment of army supplies to the West. It will cause large and continuous disbursements of money, increasing local trade, and giving increased market facilities for the productions of the State at large. The fact will go far to stimulate the now rapid settlement of our unoccupied lands, and the direct and indirect benefits we are to derive from it can scarcely be over-estimated.^{1 14}

Although observers of the contemporary scene alternately praised and condemned the mission of the Department of the Platte, they nevertheless recognized it as a functioning institution. Today, however, the role of the Department of the Platte in the settlement of the West has nearly been forgotten. The stage has been preempted by the restless, individualistic settler, and the only glory which accrues to the Army is that of the Indian wars. The homely and perfunctory duties of the Army described in this paper have long since passed into the archives. Nevertheless, it was the performance of these colorless but arduous tasks which made the settlement of the West possible.

NOTES

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98. Report of E. O. C. Ord, September 9, 1874. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* for 1874, I, 32.
99. Adj. Gen. H. G. Litchfield to Commanding Officer, Ft. Laramie, January 21, 1868. Department of the Platte, Telegrams Sent, 1867-1868. Records of the War Department, U.S. Army Commands, National Archives; Raymond Welty, "The Policing of the Frontier by the Army," *Kansas Historical Quarterly*, VII (August, 1938), 251-252.
100. General Orders No. 4 issued by W. T. Sherman, Division of the Missouri, August 10, 1868. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* for 1868, III, 8-9; Welty, "The Policing of the Frontier by the Army," *K.H.Q.*, 252-253.
101. U. S. Grant to C. C. Augur, October 5, 1867. Department of the Platte, Letters Received, 1866-1872.
102. Post Return of Red Cloud Agency, December 1877; Records of the War Department, Adjutant General's Office, National Archives.
103. Gen. W. H. Emory, Ft. McPherson, to Maj. George Russell, September 3, 1869. Department of the Platte, Letters Received, 1867-1869.
104. Letters from Maj. E. B. Grimes to Quartermaster William Myers, December 4, 1867, December 2, 1869. *Ibid.*
105. *Omaha Weekly Republican*, January 8, 1866.
106. Report of the Quartermaster General for 1876. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War*, 44 Cong., 2 sess., *House Ex. Doc. No. 1*, I, 112, 149.
107. Lt. Col. Palmer, Ft. Laramie, to Lt. Col. H. G. Litchfield, August 5, 1867. Department of the Platte, Letters Received, 1867-1869.
108. *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 1, 1875; *Omaha Weekly Republican*, January 8, 1876; *Omaha Weekly Republican*, January 3, 1877. The Annual Report of the Quartermaster General gives the actual number of troops, tonnage of freight, and costs on the Union Pacific but provides no breakdown by military department.
109. Raymond Welty, "Supplying the Army on the Frontier," Welty Papers (MSS in the Nebraska State Historical Society), 297, 302, 304-305; *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* for 1868, I, 966, 871.
110. Headquarters of the Department of the Platte to Commanding Office, Camp Douglas, November 5, 1873; Capt. Lazelle to Gen John E. Smith, April 3, 1874. Department of the Platte, Letters Sent, 1866-1877.
111. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, May 25, 1870.
112. *Omaha Daily Bee*, January 1, 1875.
113. Report of the Quartermaster General for 1874. *Annual Report of the Secretary of War* for 1874, I, 146.
114. *Omaha Weekly Herald*, April 6, 1866, June 1, 1866, July 29, 1868.