



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Foreword

Full Citation: R Eli Paul, "Foreword," *Nebraska History* 78 (1997): 150

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1997PaulForeword.pdf>

Date: 3/25/2013

Article Summary: "Everyday Life of the Frontier Soldier" is the theme of this issue of *Nebraska History*. Eli Paul summarizes the four papers from the second Fort Robinson History Conference reprinted here with an additional article on the same subject.

# Foreword

Lt. Alvin H. Sydenham, a Kearney, Nebraska, native and a relatively fresh alumnus of the United States Military Academy, tried to interest the American public in the everyday life of the frontier soldier. Before his untimely death in 1893, he contributed a few penned vignettes of, as he termed it, "our own little regular army." One appeared in the August 13, 1892, issue of *Harper's Weekly*, illustrated by an acquaintance, the famed western artist Frederic Remington. Lieutenant Sydenham wrote:

The only attention we ever get that is truly valuable is when Mr. Remington or Mr. [Rufus] Zogbaum, or some other kind fellow, being benevolently and charitably disposed, makes a tour of our camps, eats salt pork off a tin plate, drinks straight whiskey toddies with the commanding officer, gets a shaking up on a long march over a hilly road, dodges the bullet from a redskin's rifle . . . , and then comes home weary and sick, with a bundle of sketches under his arm and a bookful of experiences tearing at his memory, to write us up in the newspapers. That is where our popularity begins, and that is where it ends.

These gentlemen, with their impressionable eyes and wits ever ready to catch the salient points, see a great deal of the best that is in us; and with their skilful brush and pencil bring before you in vivid outlines a little of what they saw; but it is only a little. They are the best friends we have; but they, like yourselves, have too much to do to spend all their precious time on us. Thus we have our ups and downs; our popularity comes by jerks, and our virtues appear before you, in spots and patches.

A century later Lieutenant Sydenham might have been pleasantly surprised to learn that he and his comrades still receive considerable public attention. No better example exists than when the Fort Robinson History Conference convenes at Fort Robinson State Park, the site of the first and second such gatherings in April 1995 and 1997. The conference theme for the former was "Material Culture of the Frontier Army;" for the latter, "Everyday Life of the Frontier Soldier," and more than a few of Sydenham's "salient points" were caught during the course of the proceedings.

As with the First Fort Robinson History Conference, the second was a splendid blend of western history, military sites archeology, material culture research, and popular culture studies. Western historians have come to realize that the many "outposts on the plains" are invaluable microcosms of late nineteenth-century community life, especially when the lives of the dependents of the officer and enlisted man are examined as well. Fort Robinson, Nebraska, but one of many military communities whose history has been explored during the conference, is no exception. It served as an excellent backdrop to an in-depth discussion of the frontier military experience, especially for the years 1865–1900.

The second conference received its inspiration from an influential book, Don Rickey's *Forty Miles a Day on Beans and Hay: The Enlisted Soldier Fighting the Indian Wars* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963). Considered a classic in its field, Rickey's book broke new ground in narrating a

largely forgotten set of past lifeways. It stressed those aspects of the oftentimes mundane life of the enlisted man without allowing the blood and thunder of the Indian Wars to overpower the story. The articles presented in this issue of *Nebraska History* keep to that tradition. As one of the conference organizers and as the guest editor of this issue, it is my great pleasure to present four papers from the Second Fort Robinson History Conference:

In "Ten Troopers: Buffalo Soldier Medal of Honor Men Who Served at Fort Robinson," author Frank N. Schubert previews his latest book on the African American soldier. In doing so, he features the colorful history of Fort Robinson, the duty station for those individuals whose acts of valor are herewith discussed.

Mary L. Williams profiles the significant roles the officers' wives played in garrison life in "Ladies of the Regiment: Their Influence on the Frontier Army." This essay stems from her long-standing research and interpretive efforts to focus on the everyday life of the military man's dependents.

John D. McDermott presents current research in "Were They Really Rogues?: Desertion in the Nineteenth-Century U.S. Army." Expanding his story by the additional historical perspective of the Civil War years, this article on an important yet overlooked topic promises to be a lasting contribution to military history.

James E. Potter expands on a past research interest to explore the fascinating topic of firearms accidents involving frontier soldiers. In "He . . . Regretted Having to Die That Way': Firearms Accidents in the Frontier Army, 1806–1891," Potter details the technologies of the day, their limitations and dangers, and the lack of expertise most raw recruits brought to the army.

Rounding out the issue is a fifth article, "Chasing Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse: Two Fourteenth U.S. Infantry Diaries of the Great Sioux War," edited by Jerome A. Greene. Although not a presenter at the Second Fort Robinson History Conference (he was a presenter, though, at the first), this primary source material neatly fits the issue's theme. Greene presents the accounts of an officer and an enlisted man on campaign, their "ups and downs," occasionally dodging enemy bullets but more likely making long, exhausting marches.

Young Alvin Sydenham, the budding writer, died too soon to make an indelible imprint as a chronicler of the frontier soldier. The Indian-fighting army as a part of the American West survived only for a few more years as global adventures awaited it and the nation. But there has been no lack of later historians to take up the reins. Thankfully they, "with their impressionable eyes and wits," continue to research and write about Sydenham's "little regular army."

R. Eli Paul  
Nebraska State Historical Society