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Article Summary: This article includes letters from two military men stationed in Nebraska. A private describes for his brother at home the daily routines and distractions of the Missouri Mounted Volunteers. A captain in the regular army serving as commander of Fort Childs complains to his superior about inadequate shelter, clothing, and medical resources at the fort.

*For another perspective on life at Fort Childs see illustrator William Henry Tappan's journal reproduced in the article ["A great place for gambling whiskey drinking & roguery": A Fort Childs Diary, 1848,](#)" Fall 2001.*

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Photographs / Images: sketches by James F Wilkins: the abandoned Fort Kearny on the Missouri River, May 1849; the new Fort Kearny on the Platte River, June 3, 1949, showing men at work on the roof of the hospital

# SOLDIERS' LETTERS



*from Fort Childs, 1848-49*

*Edited and with an Introduction by Richard E. Jensen*

While Fort Kearny (née Childs) established on the Platte River in 1848 would become one of the most prominent manmade landmarks on the Oregon Trail, its beginning was not auspicious. The few sod buildings and the small compliment of poorly equipped soldiers received only passing mention in emigrant diaries and letters. The letters of Pvt. William Wilson Ingraham to his brother in Peoria, Illinois, are a rare exception, providing a word picture of life at both the original Fort Kearny on the Missouri River and new Fort Kearny on the Platte. Reports by Capt. Charles Frederick Ruff describe conditions at the new fort when he took command of the installation late in 1848.

When William Ingraham enlisted in the Missouri Mounted Volunteers he had the mistaken notion that he would be sent to the Far West to "kill indians and hunt buffaloe." Instead his unit spent the winter of 1847-48 at Fort Kearny at present day Nebraska City, Nebraska. In the spring they traveled about 180 miles west to build Fort Childs on the Platte River.<sup>1</sup>

Ingraham was born on July 24, 1826, to Harry E. and Content Wilson Ingraham in Kickapoo, Illinois. He died on June 9, 1888.<sup>2</sup> In his letters Ingraham wrote about the possibility of going to Mexico, Oregon, or Missouri after he left the army. Whichever path he ultimately chose seems to have led to obscurity.

There is also a certain murkiness concerning his letters. Typed copies were given to Nebraska State Historical Society by Virginius H. Chase, Ingraham's grand-nephew, in the fall of 1955. It is clear from references in the existing

correspondence between Chase and the Historical Society that other letters were lost or, more likely, that details of Ingraham's life history had been discussed in conversations for which no notes were kept.<sup>3</sup> An Internet search with assistance from genealogists uncovered a plethora of William Ingrahams, but none that could be definitely linked to the author of the letters presented here. Letters written by William's brothers were discovered at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois but offered nothing in the search for the mysterious William.<sup>4</sup>

Charles Frederick Ruff entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1834, and in 1842 Lieutenant Ruff resigned. Four years later he joined the Missouri Volunteers with the rank of lieutenant colonel. After three months he re-entered the regular army as a captain in the Mounted Rifle Regiment and saw action in the Mexican War. Captain Ruff commanded Fort Childs from late October 1848 until the end of May 1849. He later served in other western posts and was promoted to brevet brigadier general for his recruiting efforts in the Civil War. He was a lieutenant colonel when he retired in 1864.<sup>5</sup>

## The Ingraham Letters

Fort Leavenworth  
July 28, 1847

Dear Brother<sup>6</sup>

this the first opportunity I have had of writing since I left home. I am now on my way to the rocky mountains to kill indians and hunt buffaloe. I took five dollars from the store when I started and took passage at Peoria for St. Louis.<sup>7</sup>

While going down the river I saw a steamboat burst and a woman and child fall overboard. At St. Louis I walked around a while with Howard a young man that came with me. The city was full of companies of horse and foot volunteers either for Oregon, Mexico City, Santa Fe, California or Chihuahua (pronounced Chee wor wor) Howard and I joined a company called the Sublette Rangers.<sup>8</sup> We have twenty eight dollars a month and out of our first six months pay a hundred and twenty dollars are deducted to pay for our horses and their saddles and bridles and our clothing. We have been marching for eighteen days through dust so thick that you could not see the third man that rode ahead of you. Sometimes we would have to ride thirty miles before we could find any water for our horses or ourselves.<sup>9</sup> We will start in a few days from the Fort to occupy a station somewhere in the mountains.

I hope the hail storm that took place the day I started did not hurt the crop. The hailstones broke every window glass on Water street. There was about a dozen children gathering strawberries on the bluffs. One of them was killed.<sup>10</sup> When the war with Mexico [ends] I am coming back again. When discharged at the end of the war I am entitled to a hundred and sixty acres of land. I think I will take it somewhere in Oregon. I shall not be able to write home or rather send a letter home more than once a year but when ever I get a chance I will be sure and give you a description of the country. Here at the Fort the indians come into the camp every day with moccasins and ponies to sell. Some of the ponies are

## Letters from Fort Childs, 1848-49



James F. Wilkins drew this sketch of the abandoned Fort Kearny on the Missouri River in May 1849.  
Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

not more than three feet and a half high.  
Ink is very scarce and only one man  
has it in the camp and he is in a hurry  
for it, so no more from your

Affectionate Brother  
William W. Ingraham

To Edward H. Ingraham

Fort Kearney  
November 13, 1847

Dear Ned

I have another opportunity to write to you for the first time since I left Leavenworth. The next place that we stopped at after we left the Fort was Iowa Point. We staid there for a week and I went to the church at the Mission and heard the missionary preach to the Indians in their own language and deliver an address to the volunteers.<sup>11</sup> While we were there an old indian died and I went to the funeral. I never heard such a howling in all my life. They put him in his grave in a sitting position and put his bow and arrows and his spear in his hands and those nearest the grave cut themselves with their knives and smeared the blood on a bunch of turkey feathers and tied it on a pole with a white rag.

From there we marched to Fort Kearney. It was nothing but a solitary block house, but now we have built our winter quarters it has quite a respectable appearance. Our quarters are built of

logs and covered with sods and dirt, with sod chimneys.<sup>12</sup>

About a week after we reached the fort thirty of our company were detailed to assist the quartermaster's men in putting a bridge over the Nimahaw for the purpose of bringing over the stores. While they were gone about five or six hundred indians came down across the prairie much to the alarm of those remaining in the camp. Some of the bravest men saddled their horses and prepared for flight, others more desperate loaded their rifles and got behind a pile of flour sacks and prepared to receive them, but it happened to be a tribe of Otos driven down by the Sioux, coming to the fort for protection.<sup>13</sup> They were attacked by the Sioux while their warriors were on a hunt and there were but sixty efficient men in the village. Some of their chiefs came up to our camp and had a long talk with the captain. they said that the Sioux charged into their village on horseback and their warriors could scarcely keep them at bay while their women swam the Platte river with their children. Many of the children were drowned in the river while they were tied to their mothers. They told of a young squaw that was surrounded in a wigwam. She killed several of the enemy before she was taken, which was done by setting fire to the house. The indians while they were at the fort

raised such a yelling that we could hear them for five miles.

Our company was ordered to go as a guard for the surveyor to Grand Island for the purpose of selecting a situation for another fort.<sup>14</sup> Our horses had to live on nothing but grass the first day. A horse gave out and he was just turned loose on the prairie until we came back. The second day we came to Salt Creek and the next we came to a lake at the head of it. The lake was dry and the bottom of it was covered with a crust of salt a quarter of an inch thick.<sup>15</sup> The second day after that we were met by a small party of indians going to Santa Fe to steal horses.<sup>16</sup> Each of them had a laraette rope hanging on his belt. That night some more of them came into our camp. The captain made them a present of some cartridges, but they refused them because it was not enough. they pretended to be very angry and threatened us to bring down their warriors. The captain acted very coolly and issued some more ammuniton to his men, so the red rascals thought proper to cool down a little. The next night two or three came in to the camp to steal horses and were fired upon by the guard. We had a grand time hunting buffaloe. I had the [luck?] of killing several. I should have killed more but I did not wish to injure my horse. More than a hundred shot and left untouched in the field.<sup>17</sup>

We came down through Pawnee village and there we saw from fifteen hundred to two thousand little young indians each with his bow and arrows and laraette.<sup>18</sup> I saw a little indian not bigger than Dunk<sup>19</sup> throw his laraette over the neck of a pony at full gallop. There is a rumor that we will be discharged in the spring, but I do not believe it is true.

Excuse my bad writing for I have almost forgot how. When you write direct your letters to High Creek, Atchinson County Missouri,<sup>20</sup> Oregon Battalion, Company A. for the Army. I wish you would send me a paper now and then, I would like to know what is going on in the world. I feel the want of books very much. Tell Dunk the game is so thick at Grand Island that we were never out of sight of it, there were buffaloe, antelope, elk, deer, wolves, hares and whole acres of prairie dogs. The dogs live in the same holes with owls and rattlesnakes. We surrounded some deer one day and one of them jumped over the mules into the wagon and nearly knocked the driver off.

I wish you would tell me how you get on at the farm. I hope every thing gets on well. I must stop writing now for two reasons, one is that I cant think of anything more to say, the other is another man wants the pen and ink.

William W. Ingraham.

Jan. 22nd 1848  
Fort Kearney

Dear Ned:-

I was very glad to receive a letter from you for everybody received letters and [I] received none. I have been quite well with the exception of a slight headache and fever which I cured by a dose of Epsom salts. I have received three papers and an almanac which were very acceptable to me as well as the whole company for I assure you they went the rounds. I was very sorry that you got hurt and extremely glad that you are well again. As for the rumor [about disbanding the company] it has, like all others, had its day. We are now

very busy preparing another trip to the west. Company A & C will be sent to Fort Laramy (excuse me if I spell it wrong for I have no map) at the foot of the mountains.<sup>21</sup> The other poor fellows will have to build another block house and winter quarters at Grand Island.

You ask for a description of Fort Kearney. It lies two miles west of the western line of Iowa on the west side of Table Creek about sixty miles from the Little Nemahaw. All the south and west side is one continued prairie twenty and sometimes thirty miles between the watering places. No timber except in the hollows where there is water. On the north side of the Fort is the Missouri river, on each side of which and on an island in the middle there is plenty of timber abounding in game of all kinds. I never go in the woods but I am nearly deafened with the screeching of paroquets and croaking of ravens. On the other side of the river are numerous shanties, grog shops and grocery stores on a small scale, got up since the battalion arrived. As you go down the river there is a vast bottom covered with grass tall enough to hide a man on horseback, extending six miles from the river, beyond which are immense cliffs of sand that have the same appearance as cliffs of rock. They are two or three hundred feet high and make a very splendid appearance. You must excuse me for making so many mistakes for there are two men practicing on the fiddle in the house and make such a din that I am not [able] to hear myself speak. On the south side of the river towards the north the bluffs are nearer the river. The north side of the river, up stream, I have not explored.

The men have wolf traps set around in the woods and every two or three days they bring home a wolf & the whole battalion from the colonel<sup>22</sup> down form in a large ring and put the wolf [in it], setting on the young dogs to train them up in the way they should go. Some times they have two or three so that when one is worried nearly to death they bring in another while it is

resting — a regular amphitheater. Every day we have to drill for two hours on foot in the rifle drill, acting as skirmishers or running along in single file at double-quick time. On sunday we have another drill a horseback, where we have to dismount and act as skirmishers. Tis a very fine scene when well performed.

Two or three Mexicans have been here to see us from California. They had on hats with a crown a foot high, long coats and spurs with the rowels two Inches in diameter. Their saddles were very heavy and made of wood with a square piece of sole-leather spread on the top, and a large pair of wooden stirrups with a round flap of leather in front to keep the mud from the shoe. Tell Dunk when I come home I will fetch him a pony, the smallest I can find, but I have not found a buffalo's nest yet, —though I intend to look for one. Tell father I will [do] precisly as he wishes. Give my love to the girls, and give me the news from Henrietta in your next.<sup>23</sup>

Your affectionate brother,  
W. W. Ingraham.

Fort Kearney  
March 18th 1848

Dear Brother:-

I have been quite well since I last wrote to you except I had the measles which kept me for five days in the hospital. The weather has been very warm during the month of February. We have had very little snow and cold weather this winter. There has been great excitement in the Fort for the last two weeks. One of the seargents wrote a letter to a member of congress stating how the officers were conducting themselves, that the colonel and staff continually got drunk and that the quarter-master refused the troops lumber for their quarters and sold it to the Mormons that moved into camp, and many other grievances too numerous to mention. One of the lieutenants went to his trunk while he was absent on a furlough and took from it a copy of this letter and some of his private letters and read them. The sergeant, on his return,

## Letters from Fort Childs, 1848-49

finding them gone, hearing the officer had taken them, went to the officer and called him a d—d thief. The officer reported him to the colonel and also reported a private for selling whiskey in the camp. Petition after petition was sent to the colonel to let them go, for he put them both in irons, but the colonel would let only the private go and kept the sergeant under guard. It came very near raising a mutiny for the sergeant had many friends. It has caused the men to dislike the officers throughout the whole battalion. The sergeant aided by his friends got off his irons and deserted last night with three privates. What the sergeant wrote in the letter was true and the colonel cannot prove to the contrary.

Our future movements are entirely in the mist. Sometimes are to be disbanded and sometimes we are to continue our rout, but I think we will be sent back before the first of July. If we do I shall be glad of it, for in the state the company is in I have no desire to go further, the officers and men can put no confidence in each other. We were paid our four months wages the day before yesterday and now there is nothing but gambling and racing going on, particularly today. There has been no less than twenty races today & it is not dinner time yet.

We were called out yesterday and the adjutant announced to us the death John Quincy Adams, made a semipathetic speech and the artillery fired twentfour guns.<sup>24</sup> The orders from Washington were to haul the flag half way down the staff, but as we have not an American flag in the garrison that ceremony was omitted.

Tell father that when we are disbanded I shall take his advice and go south and try what is to be done in Mexico. The [Missouri] river is open and the captain and eighteen privates went down in a large boat brought up by the regulars before we came up here. There is a man that has joined our company since we came here that has been some years with the Pawnee Indians. He went out to farm, for them and was paid by the government. He gave me a description

of their battle with the Sioux.<sup>25</sup> The Sioux came down on horses, dismounted and came up within fifty yards of the Pawnees and halted. Then the arrows flew in clouds. Every now and then an Indian would run across to the other side and endeavor to kill someone of them. They would rush on him and kill him; but if he should happen to kill any one and get back safe he would be considered one of the greatest braves in the nation. After they had fought for a while in this manner they rushed together like a swarm of bees and very soon they (that is the Pawnees) fled and directly toward the whites who took to their heels and ran, to the horse pen, took their horses and were soon out of danger.

Tell me how all are and how they get on at Jubilee,<sup>26</sup> how Henrietta is. Tell Dunk I cant guess his conundrum, but am glad he has got to be such a scholar.

Your affectionate brother,  
William W. Ingraham.

Fort Kearney,  
April 14, 1848

Dear Brother:-

I received your letter dated the 15th of March. I was very sorry to hear you had hurt yourself again. You have certainly been unfortunate. I am glad you are well again. I hope father and Dunk will keep well. I have been very well with the exception of scalding one of my knees with hot grease while cooking, which kept me on the sick list a whole week.

Spring is setting in very fine, the [grass] is long enough for the horses to live upon without corn. The plum trees are in bloom and Table Creek is crowded with ducks. The river has raised six feet since yesterday. I think there will be a boat up in less than a week. There is news from Chihuahua that a Mexican general was marching to Santa Fe with 1500 men and there was only two companies of dragoons in the place to protect it.<sup>27</sup> It is thought by some that we will be sent down there. As soon as the first boat comes up the river we, that is our company, will be sent out to find the best crossing at Salt Creek. I shall be

glad of it for I am heartily tired of the Fort and long to be on the prairie.

The other day the head bugler had the impudence to play the rogues march when our company came on dress parade. We immediately halted and charged at him and would probably have hurt him had he not stoped and the officers interfered. He owed some of the company a grudge for not paying their bills for a ball he had given. After dark thirty men from the company went down to his quarters and rode him on a rail to the creek and ducked him in the deepest hole they could find. I wish you would send me a copy of the Motto if you can,<sup>28</sup> but I suppose there is but one copy published for the reading of the whole hill. Howard is here and is very well, but expect he wishes he was at home. Tell me how they are on the hill and the news from Henrietta. Tell Dunk as soon as I get to Salt Creek I will look for a buffalo's nest, as there is none this side of there, and that is 80 miles from here. We have begun to fish in the river. I saw one the other day that was four feet and a half long. It was a catfish.

As soon as Dunk takes possession of the Island (for no one claims it now) he can fish on the river side of it and shoot the ducks [and] geese as they swim by.

Your affectionate brother,  
W. W. Ingraham

Grand Island,  
June 5th 1848

Dear Brother:

I received your letter dated April 15th just before we started from Fort Kearney and in the bustle of preparation I had not time to answer it. We had a very pleasant time a coming up here, only one storm hard enough to wet us through the tent. We found the Pawnees very much humbled since last fall; they having lost many of their Warriors in a battle with the Sioux and another with the Foxes, Iowas and Chippawas.<sup>29</sup> They were nearly starved to death not daring to go thirty miles from home to hunt. The Colonel gave them some provisions & ammunition. They would not trade for

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anything but something to eat. The land on the banks of the Platte is level for eight miles from the water to the bluffs and continues so from the mouth to the foot of Grand Island where the bluffs come to the river for about ten or twelve miles when it spreads out again still wider. The other day I went back with a comrade to find a horse he had lost the night before. We started in the morning without any provisions thinking the horse was but a few miles back but we rode on till night and were obliged to [camp] on the bank of the river. The wolves and wild-cats came around after dark and frightened our horses so that we had to get up every few minutes to quiet them. We had nothing but our pistols and could not kill any game we had nothing to eat for two days and a hundred and sixty miles. A piece of salt pork and a hard biscuit tasted better than roast beef and plum-pudding.

I am afraid we will have to stay here all winter and not be sent further. The buffalo have not got as far north as this yet, but I hear they are within two days march. A long train of emigrants came by the other day but I did not know any of them; but there are many more coming behind and some they say from Illinois so I expect I shall see some one that I know yet before they are all past. The emigrants intend, if we go with them, to go to Oregon; if not, they will go to Californian.

I hear that a man had his daughter stolen from him by the Indians & an express has been sent from Oregon to Washington requesting troops for protection. It takes Congress so long to make up their minds what to do that the orders will not come till next winter, when we will have no grass for our horses to live on during the march.

I hope that father, Dunk and you will have a good season for tilling the farm this year. I wish you had my horse to work with Hasson. He had collar marks on his neck when I got him so I suppose he will work. He is a big-headed, long legged, bony looking thing but he will travel 15 miles at a sweeping gallop

without failing, for I have tried him.

I will write a letter to Henrietta before next mailing and tell her what Military news I can think of. Now that we have reached our destination I shall write oftener. Tell Dunk to continue against skunks, rats & mice and give no quarter and above all to study hard at his lessons for he will find the use of it when he gets older. I get the papers, but not very regular for I wait a long time and then there comes three or four all at once. I read them through and let them go through the whole company so that by the time I see them again they are all read to rags. There is always plenty of news in the camp but it is always false; the other evening we heard a shouting in another company and upon inquiry we found that the news there was that we were to be disbanded immediately. But it was not so. A man had come in it is true but he was an invalid officer from Mexico sent out as a forage master.

Give my love to all and particularly to my new niece.

Your affectionate brother,  
William W. Ingraham

P. S. Tell Dunk to give my best respects to Jerry and Smit.

June 28, 1848  
Grand Island

Dear Brother:-

The mail yesterday brought the news of peace.<sup>30</sup> The men got so excited that they could not stand it. Some twenty or thirty whos curiosity was very great mounted their horses and rode twenty miles down the river to meet the express. At night the peace was celebrated with a torch-light procession. The opinion of the Colonel is that we will return home in two months from this time. But we must wait until another battalion comes here to take our places.

The other day four hundred Cheyennes came in the camp to trade. They are the finest nation of Indians that I have seen yet. They were going down to fight the Pawnees. When they left us they took five or six horses. The next day the Colonel sent a hundred and fifty

men in pursuit of them. I volunteered to go but I was sorry for it afterwards. We followed them four days but could not catch them. We found two old Pawnee squaws that they had killed and scalped. Our leader, the Captain of company D was a fool,<sup>31</sup> he got lost in the prairie and in spite of all remonstrance he would take us on a northeast course, although men that had been there to hunt antelope told him that the camp was but twenty five miles to the north of us. So by his self-conceitedness we had to live six days on two days rations of bread and drink water such as you will find in a cistern a month after it has rained.

I wish you were here to take a hunt for the antelopes, it is capital sport. In the first place we ride six or eight miles into the prairie where the antelope are very thick and then picquette the horses and lay down. In a few minutes the antelopes will come around close to you, then run around, come closer and stop and look. When they come near enough, shoot, and if you do not kill it dead, just mount your horse and run it down. But it is useless to chase one that is unhurt, for they run like the wind. I should have wrote last week but we knew that this mail would bring news of peace or war. I received two papers the last week and one this but no letter yet.

Your affectionate brother,  
W. W. Ingraham

Grand Island  
July 12th 1848

Dear Brother:-

I received your letter dated June 19th and was very glad to hear you were all well. I am glad to hear you are getting on so well with your work. That awful explosion on the Hill surprises me. I never thought of such a thing.

We (that is the Battalion) have enjoyed very good health; but within the last month there has been two cases of smallpox, and the poor fellows from neglect are in a very miserable condition. They are moved at a distance from the camp, that the companies may not be

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infected with it. I was vaccinated at Fort Kearney with the rest of the Battalion and twice before so I do not think there is any danger of my catching it.

The wolves have become very troublesome lately, they are no longer contented with the buffalo skin lariettes with which the horses are picquetted but they take the horse and all. Several have been killed and many badly torn.

Today there came by a small party of men from Oregon on their way to the states, one or two came from the salt lake, where the Mormons are all moving to. He discribed the country there as like the floor of a brick kiln, destitute of vegetation.

As to the time that we shall be disbanded that is mighty onsertin. In the first place the Indians will be here at the full of the moon to receive the pay for the land bought here of them and then we are to send them over the river which I think they will be but little inclined to do when they get the guns they are to have for the land; and further there must be other troops sent here to relieve us. There is too much government property here to be left without a strong guard. A company is to be formed in St. Louis for the purpose, so I think we will not be disbanded before September.

We will be disbanded at Fort Leavensworth and there I shall cut across the country through Quincy to Peoria which I think is the best way as I will have a horse to ride home on and I want to look at the land In Missouri.

The Sioux have robbed and burned the Pawnee town during the absence of its inhabitants. Their holes for hiding property are broken open and pack-saddles, buffalo skins and other Indian property lay all around.<sup>32</sup>

We do not get the mail very regularly sometimes once in two weeks & sometimes not so often. The Dollar comes every mail; it is the only thing I have to read. After I am done with it it goes from one to another and I dont see it any more. I have not received the Motto yet. The climate here is very singular, in the morning it is as cold as winter and at

noon it is as hot as the hottest summer. Nothing keeps us in health I think but bathing so often in the river. Tell Dunk that if I am not home in time for the water mellons I shall be there in for the plums.

Since the news of peace there is but little news to tell.

Your affectionate brother,  
W. W. Ingraham

### Captain Ruff's Reports

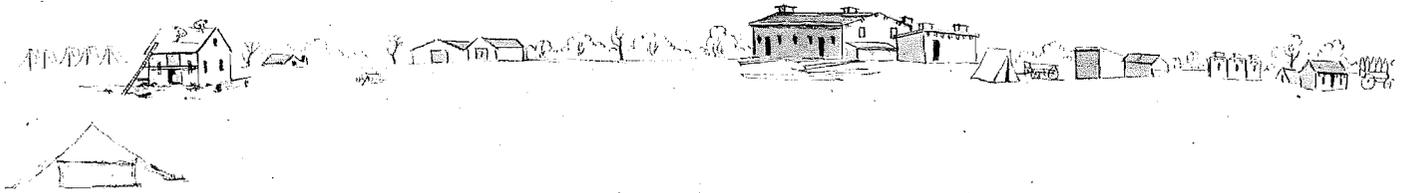
Ingraham and the Missouri Volunteers began to leave Fort Childs in fall 1848. They were replaced in October by two companies of the regular army's Mounted Riflemen. The commanding officer, Capt. Charles F. Ruff, reported to Gen. Roger Jones, the army's adjutant general, on the conditions at the fort.

*I found on my arrival here that Lieut Col Powell Missouri Volunteers, previously in command of this Post, had left for Fort Leavenworth on about the 9th of October, leaving as a garrison for this place, one 1st Lieut & 18 privates these under my instructions. I immediately ordered to report at Fort Leavenworth, for which post they left on the 30th of same month (Octr) Our situation at this post will be for this winter, one of extreme hardship & I fear of much suffering, we have our shelters yet to erect, both for men & horses & the weather already exceedingly cold, has every indication of a heavy snow with severe cold & the material of which this post is to be constructed (sod & sun dried brick) cannot be procured or worked in the snow in consequence of the scarcity of forage at the Post.*

*I have considered it best to send back to Fort Leavenworth, a portion of our horses, reserving 70 (about sufficient to mount four fifths 4/5 of each company) & the larger portion of these I fear must perish in this northern latitude & exposed prairies., without shelter; I have placed my entire command, with the exception of a sufficient Guard, upon duty constructing shelter, under the direction of 1st Lieut Woodbury Engineer corps I regret that the extraordinary conduct of Lieut Col Powell,*

*in ordering or permitting Asst Surgeon Joseph Walker U.S.A. to accompany him to Fort Leavenworth has left us entirely without medical attendance & never did troops need a medical officer more than this garrison, composed entirely of raw recruits. I have accordingly directed the Asst Qr Master to employ a suitable person, but have not the slightest suspicion that any person can be procured, for the compensation allowed by Regl [regulations] \$40 per month to come at this most inclement season of the year, this distance (220 miles) beyond the frontier of Missouri. I trust therefore the department will see the urgent necessity of prompt action & that the secretary of war will direct a medical officer to report to this post immediately. Dr. Walkers presence with Col Powell could not have been necessary as a medical officer as such, as the strength of Col Powell's escort, was as I am informed, only 4 men, including the medical officer of his own Volunteer Battalion. In connection with the departure of Lieut Col Powell I report also that he carried off with him all books, papers, order, or instructions, relative or belonging to this Post, copies of which last I suggest may be forwarded to me. two days previous to leaving Fort Leavenworth, I addressed the Hd Qr of this Dept relative to the destitute condition of the troops of this squadron in woolen clothing, and I now repeat to the Department, that the enlisted men of this command are absolutely suffering for good and sufficient clothing; at Fort Leavenworth previous to leaving, I made every effort to procure wool overalls, but there was not a pair of [in] any arm of the service at that Post, I trust that this will receive the consideration of the Dept as I fear in consequence of the illness<sup>33</sup>*

There were other problems at the new fort. In March 1849 Ruff reported twenty-three of the ninety soldiers at Fort Childs were ill with "that terrible Army Scourge" scurvy. Ruff believed he would have to discharge seven soldiers due to the crippling effects of the illness. Ruff believed the outbreak of scurvy



A sketch of new Fort Kearny on the Platte River by James Wilkins, made on June 3, 1849, shows men at work on the roof of the hospital. On June 2 Lt. Daniel P. Woodbury reported to his commanding officer that the hospital building had been erected and “is now covered with weatherboard—in one day now of working time it will be shingled.” Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

occurred because the troops had to live through “a remarkably long and rigorous winter... in shelters where a gentleman would hesitate to kennel a valuable Dog.” He also knew that certain dietary deficiencies caused the malady, and reminded General Jones that vegetables promised in November had not been delivered. Ruff placed the blame for this oversight on the “excessive depth of snow” throughout the winter.<sup>34</sup>

Ruff was concerned about the soldiers’ equipment. He convened a “Board of Survey” to examine the battalion’s weapons and concluded that their rifles were “not only useless, but an absolute & worthless incumbrance.”<sup>35</sup> Six weeks later he wrote a more emphatic demand stating “we require new Rifles; CLUBS being far more formadable than the Rifles now in our possession.” Ruff noted that all their weapons had been used in the Mexican War.<sup>36</sup>

While complaining about fort conditions, Ruff assured his commanding officers of its importance. In his letter of February 26, 1849, to General Jones, Ruff also commented on the relative importance of Fort Kearny on the Missouri and Fort Childs on the Platte and the condition of some immigrants.

*The only possible good to be derived from occupying Fort Kearny [on the Missouri River] is the obtaining a better road & direct Route to this Post [on the Platte] & others on the Oregon Route. A military garrison is not necessary there for the protection of the frontiers of*

*Missouri; this Post being for that purpose far more effective with a garrison of mounted troops.... [Fort Childs is] Situated more than 200 miles beyond and west of the frontier of Missouri & of civilization in the midst of & on the very battle ground of the most numerous & at the same time the most inveterate enemies of each other (the Pawnees & Sioux Indians) of the great & only travelled road from one half of our continent to the other half there is no Post on the western Frontier of equal importance to the safety of life and property of a vast emigration & great trade & considerations which demand the presence of a respectable force to prevent the levy of Black Mail by the war parties of one or the other of the contending tribes upon our own citizens. I am deeply impressed with the humanity, indeed the necessity of leaving to the commanding officers of the several Posts of this Route the exercise of a sound discretion in making issues of provision to such Emigrant parties of our own citizens who either in returning from or going to Oregon who frequently stand much in need of instant & substantial relief. parties have passed during the last fall who without being so relieved by the private charity of individuals must have perished from want.*<sup>37</sup>

Captain Ruff did not exaggerate the importance of the new fort on the Platte but he probably never expected the 30,000 Forty-niners who would pass the fort in that summer. One of these emigrants wrote that “Fort Kearny is

altogether a different sort of place from what I had expected. . . . There are about twenty occupied houses at the Fort, all constructed of mud cut in oblong blocks from the prairie. . . . The soldiers’ tents are scattered around. . . . We saw a few pieces of cannon, but no fortifications.”<sup>38</sup> It would take several more months before Fort Kearny would take on the appearance of a military installation.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Missouri Volunteers served in the war with Mexico prior to duties on the Oregon Trail. Raymond W. Settle, ed., *The March of the Mounted Riflemen* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1940), 13–16.

<sup>2</sup> Chase-Ingraham Family Genealogical Notebook, E. H. and D. G. Ingraham Letters, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Ill.

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Chase was from Peoria Heights, Illinois, and explained that the letters were written by his grandmother’s brother. Ingraham Collection RG5237.AM: Ingraham, William W., Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication from Nanette E. Meals, Bradley University, Feb. 22, 2001, to Richard E. Jensen.

<sup>5</sup> Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1903), 850; Albert Watkins, “Notes on the Early History of the Nebraska Country,” *Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 20 (1922): 186.

<sup>6</sup> William’s brother was Edward “Ned” Henry Ingraham. Edward was born on January 22, 1832, and was living in Peoria, Illinois, when he received these letters. He spent most of his life in Oregon. Chase-Ingraham Family Genealogical Notebook.

<sup>7</sup> Ingraham would have descended the Illinois River past Peoria to the southwest to join the Mississippi some forty miles above St. Louis.

## Letters from Fort Childs, 1848–49

By late April about 300 volunteers from Illinois had assembled at Fort Leavenworth. Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 744.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew W. Sublette joined the Missouri Volunteers in 1846 and was elected captain. He left the military in 1848 and moved to California. Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., "Andrew Whitley Sublette," *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 10 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1971), 8: 349–63. Sublette was the commanding officer of Company A of the Missouri Volunteers. Post Returns, Fort Kearny, March 1848 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, roll 564) Records of the Office of the Adjutant General, Record Group 94, National Archives and Records Administration, hereafter cited as Fort Kearny Post Returns.

<sup>9</sup> Ingraham's troop crossed the state of Missouri north of the Missouri River to reach Fort Leavenworth.

<sup>10</sup> The *Democratic Press* (June 16, 1847) reported at length on the June 12 hailstorm in Peoria, Illinois. The damage on Water Street was described, but there was no mention of fatalities or even bruised children.

<sup>11</sup> Iowa Point was a landmark in the extreme northeastern corner of Kansas. Roy T. Meyer, "The Iowa Indians, 1836–1885," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 28 (1962): 275.

The preacher was probably S. M. Irvin, Presbyterian missionary to the Iowa. S. M. Irvin, "Iowa and Sac Mission," *Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1846–1847* (Washington, D. C.: Ritchie and Heiss, 1846): 161.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Darwin was on his way to California when he visited the post. He provided a description of it in his diary on May 7, 1849.

It consists of a block house looped made of hewed logs two stories high & one set parallel to the diagonal of the other so as to command all points. This at a little distance is surrounded by rows of small log cabins numbering perhaps 300 & were occupied by the volunteers during the winter before last. The whole is on a high yet gentle acclivity & commands an excellent & pleasing view of the Mo. below for a distance of five or six miles. The big prairie stretches in its rear & a thin strip of timber lies between it & the river.

Charles B. Darwin Diary, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.

Sixty log cabins were built in 1846 to house the soldiers and perhaps a few more were added but Darwin's estimate of 300 is grossly exaggerated. Willman, "The History of Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History* 21 (1930): 220.

<sup>13</sup> The Oto were a small tribe composed of several bands. They had lived in a village on the left bank of the Platte River some fifty miles above its mouth, but in the early 1840s attacks by the Lakota caused them to move downstream to near the mouth of the river. Here the tribe divided and built two villages, one on either side of the river. John Miller to Thomas Harvey, September 10, 1847,

Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, Council Bluffs Agency, 1847–51 (National Archives Microfilm Publication M234, Roll 217) Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration, hereafter cited as Council Bluffs Agency letters.

<sup>14</sup> The surveyor was Lt. Daniel P. Woodbury. Grand Island was a number of islands resulting from the braided nature of the Platte River. They are near the modern town of Grand Island, Nebraska. The new fort was just west of the head of the islands.

<sup>15</sup> The dry salt lake was at present Lincoln, Nebraska. The soldiers must have had a very knowledgeable guide because the salt lake was on a direct line to the Platte River.

<sup>16</sup> The Indians were probably Pawnees. At that time they occupied an earthlodge village approximately opposite modern Clarks, Nebraska. Roger T. Grange, Jr., *Pawnee and Lower Loup Pottery* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1968) 23.

The soldiers had traveled 100 miles or a little more in four days since leaving Fort Kearny. They were just northwest of modern York, Nebraska, at this time.

<sup>17</sup> It would be very unusual to come across more than a few stray buffalo so far east. Incessant hunting by white and Indian hunters had driven the animals further west and south.

<sup>18</sup> Ingraham must now be referring to the return trip to Fort Kearny on the Missouri River.

<sup>19</sup> Dunk was Duncan Greenleaf Ingraham, William's youngest brother born April 10, 1838. Chase-Ingraham Family Genealogical Notebook.

<sup>20</sup> High Creek was in the extreme northwestern corner of Missouri.

<sup>21</sup> Fort Laramie was built in 1834 by the fur trading company of Sublette and Campbell and was christened Fort William. On June 26, 1849, the adobe post was sold to the U.S. government and became an army outpost. Construction of log and timber buildings adjacent to the old structures began the following year. Remi Nadeau, *Fort Laramie and the Sioux Indians* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1967), 64–65, 303.

<sup>22</sup> The colonel of the Missouri Volunteers was Ludwell E. Powell. He served from August 30, 1847, until his discharge at Fort Leavenworth on November 11, 1848. Albert Watkins, "History of Fort Kearny," *Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society* 16 (1911): 238.

<sup>23</sup> Henrietta was Ingraham's older sister born in 1816. She married Lewis H. Lighthipe. Chase-Ingraham Family Genealogical Notebook.

<sup>24</sup> John Quincy Adams was the sixth president, serving from 1825 to 1828. He died on February 23, 1848.

<sup>25</sup> This was almost certainly Lester W. Platt who was part of the mission community to the Pawnee near present Fullerton, Nebraska. He was hired by the government to teach the Indians modern farm-

ing techniques. Daniel Miller to Thomas Harvey, October 17, 1844, Council Bluffs Agency letters. The mission was abandoned in 1846 when the Lakota attacked the Pawnee village and also threatened the missionaries. "Letters Concerning the Presbyterian Mission in the Pawnee Country, near Bellevue, Neb., 1831–1839," *Kansas Historical Collections* 14 (1915–19): 570–784.

<sup>26</sup> Jubilee College, Peoria County, Illinois, was founded by Philander Chase, the first Episcopal Bishop for Illinois and the father-in-law of William Ingraham's sister. Personal communication, Cheryl Pence, Illinois State Historical Library, June 19, 2001, to Richard E. Jensen.

<sup>27</sup> Col. Stephen Watts Kearny with 1,600 troops including some of the Missouri Volunteers took Santa Fe in August 1846. K. Jack Baure, *The Mexican War: 1846–1848* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974).

<sup>28</sup> *The Motto* was a bulletin published by Jubilee College in Peoria County, Illinois. Only a few copies survive at the Illinois State Historical Society Library, Springfield. Personal communication, Cheryl Pence, Illinois State Historical Library, June 19, 2001, to Richard E. Jensen.

<sup>29</sup> The Lakota or Sioux who ranged to the north and west of Pawnee country were the Pawnees' most formidable enemy. The Iowa, Fox, and Cippewa tribes were living on reservations in the northeastern corner of present day Kansas. The Pawnee regarded them as invaders into the hunting grounds in the Republican River drainage and it is likely that this was where the first altercations took place. In late May or early June an Iowa war party did attack the Pawnee killing seventeen. *Missouri Republican* (June 20, 1848) quoted in Watkins, "Notes on the Early History of the Nebraska Country," 178.

<sup>30</sup> The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the war with Mexico on March 12, 1848.

<sup>31</sup> Capt. W. Rodgers commanded Co. D of the Missouri Volunteers. Fort Kearny Post Returns, March 1848.

<sup>32</sup> Storage pits were dug into the floors of the Pawnee earthlodges. When the Pawnee abandoned the village for the summer buffalo hunt attempts were made to conceal the openings to the pits but they were not always successful.

<sup>33</sup> C. Ruff to R. Jones, November 1, 1848, Fort Kearny, Nebraska, Letters Sent, 1848–71, Records of the U.S. Army Continental Commands, Record Group 393, National Archives and Records Administration.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, April 1, 1849.

<sup>35</sup> C. Ruff to Asst. Adj. Gen., February 16, 1849, *ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> C. Ruff to Brig. Gen D. C. Buell, April 1, 1849, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> C. Ruff to R. Jones, February 26, 1849, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Weekly Reveille*, May 31, 1849, quoted in Merrill Mattes, *The Great Platte River Road* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 183.