



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: Army Laundresses: Ladies of the “Soap Suds Row”

Full Citation: Miller J Stewart, “Army Laundresses: Ladies of the ‘Soap Suds Row,’” *Nebraska History* 61 (1980): 421-436.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1980ArmyLaundresses.pdf>

Date: 3/25/2014

Article Summary: Wives of Army officers were not recognized by Army regulations, but were subject to the whims of the post commander, who could ban them from his post or detail them as he chose. However, this “non-recognition status” didn’t apply to laundresses, who were often the wives of senior enlisted men. Given legal recognition in 1802, these women drew daily rations, were assigned quarters, furnished fuel and bedding straw, and accorded the medical services of the post surgeons. The actual conditions of these women varied greatly from post to post. Here are their stories.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John W Wright, Jack Summerhays, Martha Summerhays, Elizabeth Bacon Custer, George Armstrong Custer, Wilbur Nye, Phillip F Harvey, C S Black, Bennett Riley, Mrs Nash [Old Nash], Nicholas J O’Brien, Charles Winne, W F Buchanan, Nicholas Nolan, Mrs Cavanaugh, Julia Roach, John Doyle, Ami F Mulford, George A Forsyth, George Sykes, John C Kelton, Samuel D Sturgis, Christopher C Auger, Edward O C Ord, Richard T Dodge, Henry Thomas, Randolph B Marcy, S E Whitman, Julia Gill Schnyder, Leodigar Schnyder

Place Names: Ringgold Barracks, Texas; Fort Sidney, Nebraska; Fort Robinson, Nebraska; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Fort Crawford, Wisconsin; Camp Nichols, Oklahoma; Fort Boise, Idaho; Fort Atkinson, Nebraska [Cantonment Missouri]; Cottonwood Springs, Nebraska, Fort Meade, Dakota Territory; Camp Halleck, Nevada; Fort Stockton, Texas; Fort Phil Kearny, Wyoming; Fort Concho, Texas; Camp McDermit, Nevada; Fort Bascom, New Mexico; Fort C V Smith, Montana Territory; Fort Laramie, Wyoming; Tobias, Nebraska

Keywords: soap suds row; Post Council of Administration; Company F, 7th Iowa US Cavalry; Light Company A Sixth Infantry; Company G, 27th US Infantry; 1876 Banning Committee; General Order 37; Army Circular No 3, April 10, 1883

Photographs / Images: Julia Gill Schnyder; Sergeant Leodigar Schnyder; Mrs William Pratt; Army laundress during the 1860s

ARMY LAUNDRESSES: LADIES OF THE "SOAP SUDS ROW"

By Miller J. Stewart

"Did you not know that women are not reckoned in at all at the War Department?" These shocking words spoken by 2nd Lieutenant Jack Summerhays to his astonished wife Martha, a new addition to the feminine contingent of officers' wives at a frontier Army post in the 1870s, bluntly described the War Department position toward one class of women who chose to follow their Army husbands.¹ The outspoken Elizabeth Bacon Custer, wife of General George Armstrong Custer, acidly observed that in spite of the value placed on the presence of an officer's wife with him on the frontier, Army regulations ignored them entirely—relegated them almost to the outer recesses of officialdom. Wives were equated with other classes of camp hangers-on, subject to the whims of the post commander, who could ban them from his post or detain them as he chose.

This nonrecognition status was not, however, applied to another class of women—namely, the laundresses. These women, often wives of senior enlisted men, were carried on the tables of organization, drew daily rations, were assigned quarters, furnished fuel and bedding straw, and accorded the medical services of the post surgeons.²

The American Army had adopted the peculiar institution of company washerwomen from the British, although it wasn't until an Act of Congress, March 16, 1802, that laundresses were given legal recognition. John W. Wright, in "Some Notes on the Continental Army," states that some units of the Continental Army had as many as 20 who were recognized and drew rations. They were furnished fat from the slaughterhouses and a cask in which to make their own soap.³

The act of 1802 allowed four laundresses to a company, which proportion changed over the years to one laundress for each 19½ men. The act further provided that one daily ration

be issued to each laundress.⁴ The ration at that time (1802) was estimated to be 20c which increased to 30c by 1857. The ration in kind consisted only of meat, bread, and whiskey; all other foods had to be obtained from local sources. This ration naturally increased throughout the years until it became appetizingly varied and amply sufficient.

Where on the military reservation did the laundresses live and do the companies' work? Most often a "soap-suds row" was situated quite a distance from the rest of the garrison. And in many cases the housing furnished these women and their families ranged from the just livable to the deplorable. For example, Colonel Wilbur Nye, in his history of Fort Sill, Oklahoma, describes "suds row" thus: "East of the sewer outlet was 'Soap Suds Row,' a collection of huts, old tents, picket houses and dugouts. . . . There was an air of squalor and dirt about. Here lived the company laundresses, together with troops of shock-headed children, prowling curs and scavenging chickens." Squalor personified. At Ringgold Barracks, Texas, Assistant Surgeon Phillip F. Harvey reported in 1874 that laundresses were quartered in tents pitched on frame supports at the rear of company barracks. The tents were patched with boards, barrel staves, and gunny sacks. The post surgeon went on to say that these quarters, poorly ventilated and lighted, and overcrowded, contributed to the discomfort if not the poor health of their occupants.⁵

Moving northward to the high plains of Nebraska, sanitary conditions at Fort Sidney in February, 1889, were not conducive to maintaining good health on soap suds row. Here Captain C. S. Black discovered that the dreaded diphtheria had begun to take its toll among the denizens of the "laundry." Post Surgeon Black attributed the presence of the disease to the excessively overcrowded conditions in the houses, which were not large enough for families with many children—a common occurrence in soldiers' families. Decaying, splintered floors of the crumbling houses, which it was said harbored many infectious diseases "such as diphtheria," were contributing factors. This state of affairs coupled with "poisonous" sanitary conditions prompted Dr. Black to recommend the removal of the occupants to a more healthful area.⁶

Contrasting with the wretched conditions at Fort Sidney was a better maintained area for laundry work at Fort Robinson.

This far northwestern Nebraska post in the late 1880s offered better facilities, but housing still verged on the barely livable.

Here the enlisted man, most often a sergeant, his laundress wife, and children occupied a 144x35-foot building divided into 12 sets of quarters with a kitchen added on to the rear of each set. These quarters, which sheltered 12 families, eight Negro and four white, afforded sufficient air space but lacked adequate light and ventilation. Unfortunately, they were fast falling into disrepair. Hygienically speaking, the nearby areas left much to be desired. Slops and waste water filtered into the soil when sandy; in other places they did not. Crumbling privies and hen coops sprawling at the rear of the quarters added to unsanitary conditions.⁷

It is not to be assumed that the post commanders allowed these conditions to continue unabated; they were constantly on the alert to stop the spread of disease with sanitary measures. But the areas of military posts which seemed to need continued attention were the housing areas of the lower-rank military personnel.

In contrast, Fort Sidney, Nebraska, in 1872 seemed a more enjoyable place. Here laundress quarters, 71x140-feet, constructed of cement and stone with shingle roofs, were built to accommodate three families.⁸ This allowed approximately 713 square feet per family, and if ventilation and light were sufficient and the families not too large these quarters proved quite comfortable. Certainly these were different from the diphtheria-ridden huts condemned at this same post by Surgeon Black 17 years later.

The question naturally arises, why was housing for such ranks so inadequate and why was it allowed to fall into such disrepair. Several reasons may be advanced: (1) inadequate appropriations by an economy-minded Congress; (2) post commanders and staff who gave low priorities to laundresses' housing; (3) animosity between the post quartermaster and the medical department; (4) aggressive post surgeons who stepped on too many toes in efforts to safeguard the health of the post.

Nevertheless, whether their surroundings were neat or shabby, the Army's laundresses rubbed and scrubbed and hung up the company's daily wash. Enlisted men and officers paid for their laundry at a rate determined by the Post Council of Administration. This council, which met once a month, consisted

of three regimental or company officers next in rank to the commanding officer. Debts due the laundresses by the soldiers were collected at the pay table. It may be assumed that the rates set by the council were commensurate with local charges. In 1812 the commander at Fort Wayne established a price of 25c per dozen for items (size and description not given) when the laundress provided the soap, and 14c per dozen when the soldier provided the soap.⁹ Soap was then a scarce item.

At Fort Crawford, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1851, the monthly rate for washing two shirts, two pair of drawers, and two pair of socks each week was 50c. Overcoats and blankets were washed for 12½c each, later increased to 25c. The Fort Ridgely, Minnesota, Post Council established charges of 75c per month for enlisted men's washing and \$3.00 for officers.¹⁰

Farther west, rates for washing appeared to be higher. It was reported that enlisted men at Camp Nichols, on the Oklahoma-New Mexico border, paid \$1.00 per month for their laundry.¹¹ The Fort Boise, Idaho, Post Council in 1866 set the laundry rates at \$2.00 per month for enlisted men and \$5.00 for officers.¹²

In general, laundry rates established by post councils reflected the average wage scales for unskilled civilian labor at most military posts. If laundry charges were set at 50c per month for enlisted men and \$4.00 per month for officers, the monthly charges for the average infantry company of 50 men and five officers would be \$47 or about \$11 per month for each of the four company laundresses. Not an inconsiderable sum when a private of the 1840s also drew about \$11 each month for his arduous duties!

But the daily lives of washerwomen were not roses and sunshine. As long as they were subject to military regulations, they were by that fact subject to the vagaries of the officers of the post and that could be good or bad.

An incident illustrating the sometimes quixotic situations occurred at Fort Atkinson, Nebraska, in the 1820s where the officer of the day, Captain Bennett Riley, took umbrage at a tongue-lashing given him by an irate laundress by the name of Hannah. He charged that she used disrespectful language. The military court found her guilty and sentenced her to be discharged from the service and banished from the post. The commanding officer, however, took pity on her, remitted the



Julia Gill Schnyder was probably a company laundress at the time of her 1864 marriage to Ordnance Sergeant Leodigar Schnyder, who retired at Tobias, Nebraska. Courtesy Fort Laramie Historic Site, Fort Laramie, Wyoming. . . (Right) Schnyder (1813-1896) served in the Army 53 years, longer than any other non-commissioned officer. Courtesy Tobias Historical Society.



Mrs. William Pratt, about 1884, wife of a private in Company C, 7th Infantry, stationed at Fort Laramie until 1890. She may have worked as a laundress. Courtesy Fort Laramie (Wyoming) Historic Site.

sentence, and permitted Hanna to resume her scrubbing and rubbing.¹³

Another laundress at a western Army post didn't fare so well as Hannah. This unfortunate lady in a letter to her friend, a major at Fort Boise, Idaho, in 1866, related that she had been arrested and brought up on charges of assaulting her husband with a tin cup—an axe, he said. Her sentence was a harsh one. She was ordered to be drummed off the post in full view of all the soldiers. To add to her misery and fear, a "bullying brute" of a sergeant threatened her with death or flogging because she had placed two of her children in an ambulance during a march.¹⁴

In 1864 a recently appointed sergeant of F Company, 7th Iowa Cavalry, while stationed near Cottonwood Springs, Nebraska, approached his officers with an idea for the construction of a laundry in order that men might wash clothes. The idea sounded good, and a 20-foot-square washhouse was built near a good well. Next, the scheming sergeant suggested that the company needed a laundress to do the washing. He, of course, had a fit candidate in mind: a young woman named "Linty" from the nearby McDonald Ranch who had been with them ever since leaving a west-bound wagon train. She was a woman of imposing proportion: "tall, slim, razor-faced, about six feet three, and looked like a human being that wasn't afraid of wildman or beast." Captain Nicholas J. O'Brien of F Company added to this description of Linty with the simple words, "She was as ugly as a mud fence." Linty, whose surname had been reduced from Lenthly, was a glutton for work and always did a superb job of washing and cleaning. Being unmarried, she was in the market for a husband should a likely prospect appear.¹⁵

All the men of the company agreed to Linty's appointment as company laundress. She was entered on the rolls of the company and took up quarters in the new building, where she started doing the company wash. She was strong and industrious and did a first-rate job.

Then it happened! In May, she and the sly old sergeant appeared before Captain O'Brien asking to be married. A puzzled captain, questioning his authority to marry them, reluctantly did so. Thereupon, the sergeant moved in with Linty, and each of them drew separate rations.¹⁶

Company F soon saw that they had been deceived; that the

conniving sergeant had used them to gain a working wife who could add to the household's economy through her rations and income. Digruntled officers at the first opportunity reduced the sergeant in rank and sent him on a horseshoeing and wagon-repair detail. Nevertheless, this unlikely couple stayed together, and Linty, who went on all the marches and expeditions of the company and shared in its dangers and troubles, became a highly respected female member of Company F, 7th Iowa Cavalry.¹⁷

Without a doubt, however, the most well-known laundress of the Indian Wars was a Mrs. Nash of the 7th US Cavalry. Before joining the 7th as a laundress, Mrs. Nash dressed as a man and did "man's work," but finding laundry work easier, she donned skirts to do women's work for the troopers.

Elizabeth Bacon Custer wrote that "Old Nash," as she was called, had long followed the 7th Cavalry as a laundress. She was a Mexican woman, tall, angular, awkward, and seemingly coarse, but actually she possessed a tender-hearted nature. Mrs. Nash, in addition to doing laundry, baked pies—as so many laundresses did—retailored soldiers' uniforms and managed to accumulate a tidy sum of money, with which her enlisted-man husband soon absconded.

Without obtaining a divorce Mrs. Nash married another soldier and traveled west with the regiment to Dakota. The second husband turned out no better than the first; he, too, stole her savings and deserted. In spite of her marital problems, Old Nash became quite popular with the women of the regiment chiefly because of her great skill as a midwife.¹⁸

In 1878 Mrs. Nash, who had established another union with a corporal at Fort Meade, Dakota Territory, became seriously ill and died while he was on expedition with his unit. As she was dying she begged the women in attendance to disregard final rites and bury her immediately after death. The women found it unthinkable not to pay final respects to a person who had for so many years cared for their sick and dying. In preparing her body for burial, her friends to their utter amazement were shocked to discover that the faithful, tender laundress, was, in truth, a man.¹⁹

In contrast to laundresses like Linty and Mrs. Nash, the Army had some who were inept, self-willed, quarrelsome, regulation-defying, and even pugilistic. These women gave post and com-

pany commanders problems they would just as soon have avoided. One obstreperous Camp Halleck, Nevada, washerwoman who refused to work made it necessary for "a gentle Eastern girl" (probably the wife of an Army officer at the post) to substitute at the scrub board and "redden her knuckles."

After a dusty caravan pulled into Fort Stockton, Texas, women of the party were refused laundry service by disgruntled laundresses, who stubbornly refused to work because they "didn't labor on the Sabbath." One lady of the party expressed her thoughts on the incident by saying that the refusal spoke well of their piety, but she was of the opinion the laundresses had more entertaining things to do on Sunday.²⁰

The wife of Post Surgeon Charles Winne at Fort Sidney, Nebraska, 1876, had a different problem; her laundry was too well done. She became angered when she discovered that her "wretched laundress" had ruined some of her things, especially her new nightgown, by using too much concentrated lye in the wash.²¹ Contending with inept, oftentimes young, inexperienced girls was a frustrating problem for many service wives, themselves often of genteel background.

At Cantonment Missouri (later Fort Atkinson), Nebraska, one regulation-defying washerwoman gave her superiors a problem they would have gladly avoided. It seems that the sanitary conditions at the fort were becoming so bad that regimental orders were issued prohibiting the careless disposal of waste material about the company areas. This order didn't deter the laundress, who was arrested for continuing to defy orders by "indiscriminately throwing and depositing in front of the Quarters of Light Company A, 6th Infantry. . . quantities of foul and dirty water." The defiant prisoner pleaded guilty and was sentenced to the stoppage of her whiskey ration for 10 days.²² A most disturbing state of affairs when a whiskey ration in those days was such a highly prized commodity!

While most laundresses were wives of senior non-commissioned officers, occasionally a single girl would take on such employment, and that usually spelled trouble. At Fort Phil Kearny, in far northern Wyoming, the commander of Company H was confronted with such a problem. He was ordered to investigate charges that a woman called "Colored Susan" was selling "ardent spirits" to soldiers and that she sold at exorbi-

tant rates pies made of government flour and fruit, keeping the profits for herself. The company commander was advised that the girl "was a disorderly woman, breeding mischief in the garrison" by inciting servants to quit their posts. Investigation showed she had been profane, abusive, and promiscuous before her arrival at Fort Phil Kearny. She was warned to improve her conduct or be summarily ejected from the post.²³ Why she was hired in the first place and whether she reformed are not matters of record.

At Fort Concho, Texas, post authorities were called upon to deal with a Negro laundress who refused to leave the vicinity of the post hospital after being fired by Dr. W. F. Buchanan, post surgeon, for "theft, disqualification to tell the truth, and general impudence." A detail of soldiers was necessary to remove her from the hospital area. Two weeks later Captain Nicholas Nolan found it necessary to fire three white laundresses because of their "utter worthlessness, drunkness and lewdness," as the company clerk ungrammatically phrased it.²⁴

Other laundresses of a more violent nature were encountered from time to time. One such character was a Mrs. Cavanaugh of Camp McDermit, Nevada, who in the spring of 1871 threatened to kill a first lieutenant with a butcher knife because he had ordered her husband, the troop blacksmith, to be tied up by his thumbs for being drunk at evening stables.²⁵ Another hellion who struck fear in the hearts of offending soldiers was a Mexican laundress of Fort Bascom, New Mexico, in 1866. Enraged at a soldier's remark about her, she warned him that if he told another lie about her, she'd cut his tongue out. He unwisely did so, and one afternoon when the soldier was sleeping off a drunken spree, the laundress cut off the tip of his tongue. Any official action against the laundress was not reported.²⁶

Another violent character, who had the dubious distinction of being the only woman murdered at a Bozeman Trail fort, was Julia Roach, listed as a laundress at Fort C. F. Smith, Montana Territory. Whether she ever actually did washing could not be determined, but she caused plenty of trouble. Julia was the wife of Corporal John Doyle of Company G, 27th US Infantry. He had changed his name from Roach to Doyle and moved west in order to get far away from his vile-tempered wife. But "far away" wasn't far enough, as the determined Julia traced her fleeing husband to Fort C. F. Smith, Montana. Months on the

trail of her husband hadn't mellowed her in the least. Soon after her arrival at the military post in 1878, this belligerent virago seemed to take pleasure in berating and insulting any soldier who crossed her stormy path. But it was her husband, Corporal Doyle, who became the target of her threats and abuse, which she heaped upon this hapless man days on end.

Events came to a tragic end the morning of June 25 on a street between Company G barracks and the post commissary, where "in a fit of passion," engendered by the highly abusive language his wife spat at him, Corporal Doyle shot his estranged wife at close range. In falling to the ground, the mortally wounded shrew screamed, "Murderer! Murderer!" thus getting the last damning word at her distraught husband, who declared, "I did it, but I did not mean it." Corporal Doyle appeared before a Board of Inquiry, but avoided trial by deserting from his military unit at Fort Laramie, Wyoming. His wife, Julia Roach, was buried at Fort C. F. Smith.²⁷

Whether of high or low character, the laundresses performed many other essential services besides washing clothes for enlisted men and officers. They served as part-time cooks and maids in the officers' quarters, but more importantly they functioned as midwives and nurses.

The record already indicates that some of the laundresses were women of easy virtue, some were dishonest, and some were troublemakers, but on the average during the 70 odd years in which laundresses were employed, the overwhelming majority were as honorable, as chaste, and as peaceable as the other women on Army posts.

Because of the military caste system, a social barrier separated the officers' wives from the laundresses. Many officers' wives considered themselves the most important women on the post, which didn't endear them to the enlisted men. One such unimpressed soldier, Private Ami F. Mulford, Company M, 7th US Cavalry, relates an amusing incident he witnessed between a colonel's lady and a laundress: Dressed in their finest, the two women passed each other "with eyes front and noses up as if each thought she owned the whole reservation, with the troops thrown in." Both were dying to look back at the other to more closely inspect the other's dress. The officer's wife did look back and crashed headlong into a wheelbarrow.

After untangling herself, the highly embarrassed lady gave

the offending wheelbarrow a vicious kick. But the laundress had disappeared from sight. Private Mulford warmly defended the laundresses as being "ladies in every sense of the word." He became particularly incensed when certain officers' wives, "painted dolls" as he called them, usurped transportation specifically reserved for laundresses.²⁸

Mulford's opinion of the Army's laundresses was not shared by some writers, who variously described them as a rough lot living in ramshackle quarters and squalid surroundings overrun by scavenging chickens, prowling dogs, and unkempt children, some of them of dubious parentage. There are instances of laundresses becoming involved in hair-pulling fights which kept the officers of the day busily intervening to prevent mayhem.

General George A. Forsyth, more generous in his characterization of the laundresses, described them as "good, honest, industrious" persons, usually older than the enlisted men. They maintained their rights with argumentative volubility, "ever-ready for a fight, yet kind of heart in a rough manner, always ready to assist in times of distress."²⁹

Usually the laundress was the wife of a senior enlisted man, probably a "noncom." Her laundry fees, together with the extra ration she drew, enabled the soldier's family to live in relative comfort. The social position of the laundresses was low indeed, but their presence both as washerwomen and as wives was felt necessary by many ranking officers of the frontier army. Others thought differently, and the laundress question became inextricably entwined in the 1876 Army reorganization hearing in Congress. This investigation by the House Committee on Military Affairs, also known as the Banning Committee, brought out the two conflicting points of view regarding retention of laundresses.

General George Sykes' answer to the committee's question concerning retention of laundresses in the service was that while reduction in the number of laundresses would not be detrimental, "a great drag would be removed from the service." However, Sykes further replied that at remote military posts a few women as laundresses would be a good influence on the soldiers. "They like to see and talk with them. Usually, it makes them more contented."³⁰

Reflecting General Sykes' views, General John C. Kelton in his reply to the committee estimated that to discharge 1,720

laundresses would save \$154,800 in ration money, one-tenth in transportation costs, and one-twentieth in building and quarters repair. But, to dispense with the laundresses would nevertheless be detrimental to the service. Kelton further stated, "Laundresses are necessary to garrison life for their far greater purposes than as washerwomen, and their children are as neat and charming as may be found in any community." The general closed his remarks with the fear that discharge of the laundresses might bring "immorality, dishonor, and dishonesty" to the garrison.³¹

Both Colonel Samuel D. Sturgis and Brigadier General Christopher C. Auger, veterans of many years in the western frontier, echoed the refrain that the laundresses were needed and should not be dismissed.³²

General Edward O. C. Ord contended that laundresses "tend to make the men more cheerful, honest and comfortable." General Ord found the laundresses to be honest married women and wives of the best soldiers. He warned the committee that the discharge of the laundresses would be followed by the resignation of their husbands.³³

Officers opposed to keeping laundresses on the Army muster rolls described them to the committee as an encumbrance on post and a nuisance when the troops moved. Colonel Regis de Trobriand asserted that laundresses' quarters most often proved insufficient for them and their large numbers of children which seemed to steadily increase because of their "prolific aptitude." When the troops changed posts, the "transportation of all the laundresses' paraphernalia, children, dogs, beds, cribs, tables, tubs, buckets, boards and Lord knows what not, amounts to a tremendous item of labor and expense."³⁴

Two other prominent officers testifying before the committee were Colonel Richard T. Dodge and Captain Henry Thomas. Colonel Dodge bluntly stated that laundresses could and should be dispensed with, as they were but the continuation of a custom: "They are unnecessary and add much to the expense of the Army, particularly in transportation." Captain Thomas growled that his 15 years' experience told him that laundresses should be dispensed with altogether. The Army could save 6 percent on rations and 17 percent on transportation. However, he softened to the extent that he "would not turn any out now, or drive them out at end of their husband's enlistment."



Army laundress during the 1860s. Courtesy Library of Congress.

Thomas went on to say that personally he would have none; in fact, he had recently declined to accept a laundress that had been forced upon him.³⁵

Inspector General Randolph B. Marcy in his report to the secretary of war (1875) looked at the laundress situation from an economic angle and urged that they be phased out. General Marcy pointed out that under existing regulations, the Army was authorized to have a total of 1,316 laundresses, who were amply compensated for their work and who, in addition, drew rations costing \$100,000 per year. Quarters, fuel, and transportation were additional costs. Often the baggage of four laundresses with children amounted to more than that of all the enlisted men of the company, leading to a moving cost of about \$200,000 per year. Marcy continued that low budgets made it impossible to provide comfortable or even habitable quarters in most posts and that reduction or abolishment of the institution would combine economy, expediency, and humanity.

Marcy felt that it would be a breach of faith on the part of the Army to discharge those laundresses whose husbands enlisted upon condition that their wives were to accompany them. He recommended that no more married men be allowed to enlist

during peacetime, and that when current enlistments were up, those men whose wives were authorized laundresses be allowed to reenlist only in exceptional cases.³⁶

In 1876 the Banning Committee was persuaded by testimony that it should recommend discontinuing the service of laundresses. The death knell was sounded in General Order 37, dated June 19. It stated: "Hereafter women shall not be allowed to accompany troops as laundresses." Nevertheless, laundresses married to soldiers did accompany the troops until the expiration of their husbands' terms of enlistment. But Army Circular No. 3 of April 10, 1883, sounded the final note. By its authority to issue rations to laundresses expired on June 18. Thus ended the official recognition of the Army's laundresses.³⁷

As members of an institution adopted from the British Army, nurtured by the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War, and given official status by Congress in 1802, the laundresses, like old soldiers of the military ditty "just faded away."

The true character of these ladies of soap suds row cannot be gleaned from congressional reports or the observations of post or regimental commanders. Their personality, character and usefulness must fall somewhere between the extremes of the noisy, turbulent "haybags" of S. E. Whitman and that of Private Mulford's "ladies in every sense of the word." This writer is of the opinion that the majority of laundresses were as described by General Forsyth: good, honest, industrious, argumentative, but also kind-hearted in a rough sort of way.

The system appeared graceless, but for the times and manners it worked quite well. Laundresses gave more than they received, in general, fulfilling a useful function beyond their assigned work in post, camp, or garrison. Their lives were difficult, but they deserved better treatment in their own day, as well as at the hands of some historians since that time.

NOTES

1. Martha Summerhays, *Vanished Arizona* (Ltd. Ptg. 4th Edition, 1960), Arizona Silhouettes, Tucson, Arizona 11.
2. "Rules and Regulations of the Army, 1813," *American State Papers, Military Affairs V*, Vol. 1, 429, 436.
3. John M. Wright, "Some Notes On The Continental Army," *New Windsor Can-*

tonment Publication No. 2 (Vails Gate, N.Y.: National Temple Hill Association, 1963), 39.

4. John F. Callan, *Military Laws of the United States, 1777-1863*, 2d. ed., George W. Childs, Philadelphia, 1863. Testimony General Randolph B. Marcy, January 1, 1878, "Reorganization of the Army," House Miscellaneous Document No. 56, 45 the Congress, 2nd. Session, 50-51.

5. Colonel Wilbur Nye, *Carbine and Lance*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 281; *War Department, Surgeon General's Circular No. 8*, "Report On The Hygiene Of The U.S. Army," (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875), 233.

6. "Post Surgeon's Sanitary Report, February 28, 1889, Fort Sidney, Nebraska," Nebraska Historical Society, Lincoln.

7. "Medical Records, Fort Robinson, Nebraska (December 20, 1889)," Nebraska Historical Society, Fort Robinson Museum.

8. "Post Surgeon's Report, Month of October, 1872, Fort Sidney, Nebraska," Nebraska Historical Society, Lincoln.

9. Willa G. Cramton, *Women Beyond The Frontier* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Historic Fort Wayne, Inc., 1977), 3.

10. Order Book, Fort Crawford, Wisconsin, October, 1855-1856, RG 393, National Archives; Richard Gamble, *Garrison Life At Frontier Military Posts, 1820-1860* (PhD dissertation, University of Oklahoma, Norman, 1956), 176.

11. Mrs. Hal Russell, "Memoirs of Marion Russell" (*Colorado Magazine*, January, 1944), 31.

12. Patricia Stallard, "*Glittering Misery*..." (MA thesis, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, 1972), 64.

13. *Ibid.*, 65.

14. *Ibid.*, 66.

15. Eugene F. Ware, *The Indian Wars of 1864* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 165.

16. *Ibid.*, 125.

17. *Ibid.*, 126.

18. Elizabeth B. Custer, *Boots and Saddles*, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 165.

19. *Ibid.*, 167.

20. Oliver Knight, *Life and Manners in the Frontier Army* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 69.

21. Letters of Caroline F. Winne to her brother from Fort Sidney, Nebraska, September 19, 1876. Unpublished manuscript edited by Thomas R. Buecker, Nebraska State Historical Society. Original manuscript, New York Historical Society.

22. Sally Johnson, "Cantonment, Missouri, 1819-1820," 37 (*Nebraska History*, Lincoln, June 1956), 127.

23. Robert A. Murray, *Military Posts On The Powder River Country of Wyoming, 1865-1894* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), 57.

24. John M. Carroll (ed.), *The Black Military Experience in the West* (New York City: Liveright Publishing Corp., 1971), 457-458.

25. Colonel O. L. Hein, *Memoirs of Long Ago* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1925), 68.

26. Stallard, *Glittering Misery*, 74.

27. Barry J. Hagan, "I Did It, But I Did Not Mean It," *Council On Abandoned Posts* (periodical) (Arlington, Virginia: Spring, 1977), 17-21.

28. Ami Mulford, *Fighting Indians in the 7th U.S. Cavalry*, (Corning, New York: Paul Mulford, 1878; reprint, Old Army Press, 1970), 60.

29. George A. Forsyth, *The Story of a Soldier* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1911), I, 112-113, 133.

30. "Testimony of General George Sykes to the Banning Committee," February 10, 1876, *House Report No. 354, 44th Congress, 1st Session, Serial Set 1709*, 106.

31. "Testimony of General J. C. Kelton to the Banning Committee," February 15, 1876, *House Report No. 354*, 130-131.

32. "Testimony of Brigadier General C. C. Augur and Colonel S. D. Sturgis to the Banning Committee," *House Report No. 354*, 47:62.

33. "Testimony of General E. O. C. Ord to the Banning Committee," February, 1876, *House Report No. 354*, 46.

34. "Testimony of Colonel Regis de Trobriand to the Banning Committee, February 12, 1876, *House Report No. 354*, 98-99.

35. "Testimony of Colonel R. I. Dodge and Captain Henry Thomas to the Banning Committee," February 10 and 26, 1876, respectively, *House Report No. 354*, 121, 204.

36. "Report of Inspector General R. B. Marcy," October 11, 1875, *Annual Report, Secretary of War, 1875-76*.

37. General Orders No. 37, June 19, 1878, *The Adjutant General's Office*.