

**Explore Nebraska Archeology**

# The Cheyenne Outbreak Barracks



Nebraska State Historical Society



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Nebraska's past.

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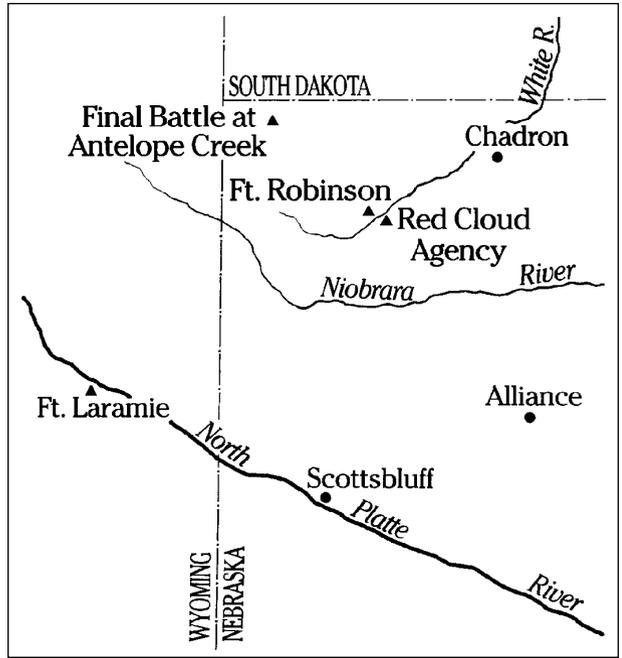
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1999

*On the cover: Brass military button. The letter  
"C" denotes cavalry branch of the army.*



### The Cheyenne Outbreak Barracks, Fort Robinson, Nebraska

The U.S. Army outpost of Camp Robinson was established in 1874 in response to the need for a military presence near the Red Cloud Indian Agency in northwest Nebraska. The camp was designated as Fort Robinson in 1878. One of the original buildings at the camp was a cavalry barracks erected in 1874. This building was the scene of a major event in Western frontier history, the 1879 Cheyenne Outbreak.

The Nebraska State Historical Society conducted the archeological excavation of the remains of this building during the summers of 1987, 1988, and 1989. The purpose of this excavation was to gather additional structural evidence and artifacts for its eventual reconstruction and interpretation. This booklet outlines the history associated with the building and some of the archeologists' findings.



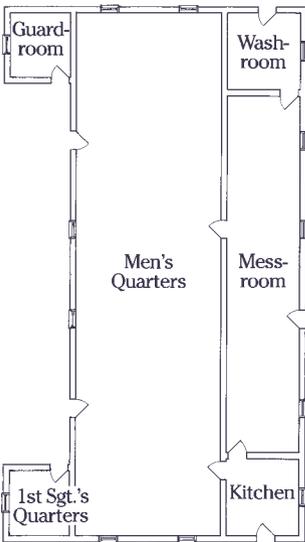
Log cavalry barracks, 1897.

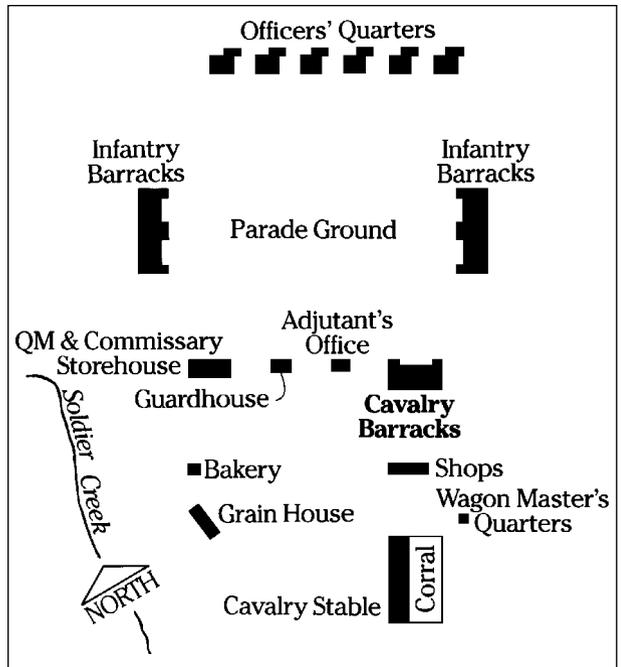
### The Barracks

When troops arrived at the Red Cloud Agency in February 1874 from Fort Laramie, Wyoming, they camped around the agency in tents. In May the camp was moved a mile southwest of the agency along Soldier Creek, and construction began on more permanent quarters. Both adobe and log construction were used in the buildings of the new camp. The Red Cloud Agency owned a sawmill that provided some cut lumber for finish and interior work. The new post would consist of a parade ground surrounded by officers' quarters, and enlisted men's barracks for infantry and cavalry, as well as warehouses and other support facilities.

Located on the southeast corner of the parade ground and adjacent to the adjutant's office (or commanding officer's headquarters) was the new cavalry barracks. A large log structure measuring about ninety by fifty feet, it contained a central barracks area where the men had their cots and clothing lockers; a mess hall, kitchen, and washroom in back; and two small rooms in front for the guard mount and the first sergeant's quarters.

Parties of soldiers cut logs for the barracks from the nearby Pine Ridge escarpment and brought them into the camp with wagons pulled by





Camp Robinson, 1875.

mules. Construction was accomplished by the soldiers under the supervision of an engineering officer. The building, of horizontal log panels set between upright posts or dividers, was built on stone and lime-mortar foundation piers and had a wooden floor of cut lumber from the agency sawmill. Hardware and other furnishings were brought from Fort Laramie.

From 1874 to 1877 the building was occupied by various companies of the Third U.S. Cavalry. In 1878 the building was temporarily unoccupied and consequently was available when Dull Knife's band of Cheyennes was brought into the fort.

### **Cheyenne Imprisonment**

The Northern Cheyenne tribe had been removed from their traditional home to a reservation with their Southern Cheyenne kinsmen in

Indian Territory (later Oklahoma) in 1877. By the following year after suffering from poor food and diseases and having been denied permission to return north, over 350 Cheyennes decided to break away from the reservation. These people, under the leadership of chiefs Dull Knife and Little Wolf, moved northward through Kansas. Several clashes with army troops and local civilians occurred, with the Indians each time able to elude recapture. Eventually they were able to slip through a cordon along the Union Pacific rail line in Nebraska and resume their northerly trek.

Somewhere in Nebraska the group broke up. Little Wolf and his followers wanted to continue moving north and join the Sioux leader Sitting Bull in Canada. For the time being, they went into hiding in the vast Sand Hills. The second group decided to try to obtain refuge with the Sioux chief Red Cloud, who was a friend of Dull Knife. With this in mind, they set out for Red Cloud Agency. Unknown to Dull Knife, however, Red Cloud and his people had been moved into Dakota Territory, and only soldiers remained near the old agency.

South of present-day Chadron, Nebraska, an army patrol intercepted Dull Knife and his people, and on October 24, 1878, escorted them



*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 15, 1879.



Dull Knife

into Fort Robinson. A total of 149 men, women, and children were taken into custody and confined in the cavalry barracks. Initially the Cheyennes were free to leave the barracks as long as all were present for evening roll call. Several of the women were even employed at the fort, and this arrangement continued into December 1878.

During this period Dull Knife requested that the Cheyennes be allowed either to join Red Cloud at his agency or to remain in their former northern Plains homeland. Attempts were also being made by Kansas officials to extradite certain members of the group to stand trial for alleged crimes committed during their flight through that state. Washington officials insisted on the return of the Cheyennes to Oklahoma.

By late December the Cheyennes were prisoners in the barracks, no longer allowed to come and go. The army was under orders to pressure them into returning south, and the Cheyennes were equally determined never to go back to the southern reservation. By the night of January 9, 1879, the impasse had come to a point of crisis, and the Cheyennes broke out of the barracks. Weapons they had hidden earlier were used to shoot the guards, and while some of the men held off the soldiers, the remaining Cheyennes fled in the dark.

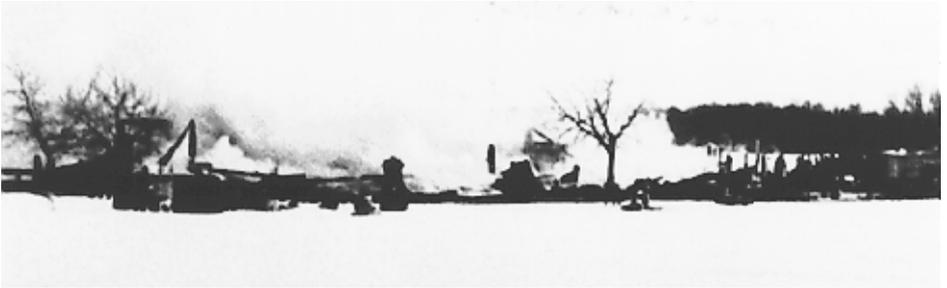
A running fight ensued along the White River valley between the fleeing Cheyennes and the pursuing soldiers. At least twenty-six Cheyenne warriors were killed that night and some eighty women and children were recaptured. Those still free eluded the soldiers until January 22, when most were killed or taken prisoner at a camp on Antelope Creek northwest of Fort Robinson. In all, sixty-four Indians and eleven soldiers lost their lives during the protracted escape attempt. Dull Knife and part of his family were among the few that managed to get away, and they eventually made their way to refuge with Red Cloud.

## **Housing for Noncommissioned Officers' Families**

For the next several years the barracks was again used as quarters for soldiers, and also for quartermaster storage. In 1890 the building was converted to housing for the families of enlisted men. Seven or eight families occupied the building, its interior having been divided into separate living spaces. In the late 1890s it housed family members of noncommissioned officers of the black Ninth U.S. Cavalry, sometimes called "Buffalo Soldiers".

## **Fire**

The building was the scene of one last tragedy. On March 22, 1898, the barracks caught fire. Two children of Sgt. Harry Wallace, Troop C, Ninth Cavalry, died in the blaze. The bodies of the children and their dog were found huddled under a bed. The structure was a total loss, and



Cavalry barracks fire.

its remains were torn down. No other buildings were ever constructed on the location. In the early 1900s the army erected a monument commemorating the death of Crazy Horse on the site of the barracks, mistakenly believing it to be the location of the long gone adjutant's office, where the famous Sioux chief died. Subsequently this monument has been relocated opposite the nearby reconstructed guardhouse, the site where Crazy Horse received his mortal wound during a scuffle with soldiers on September 5, 1877.



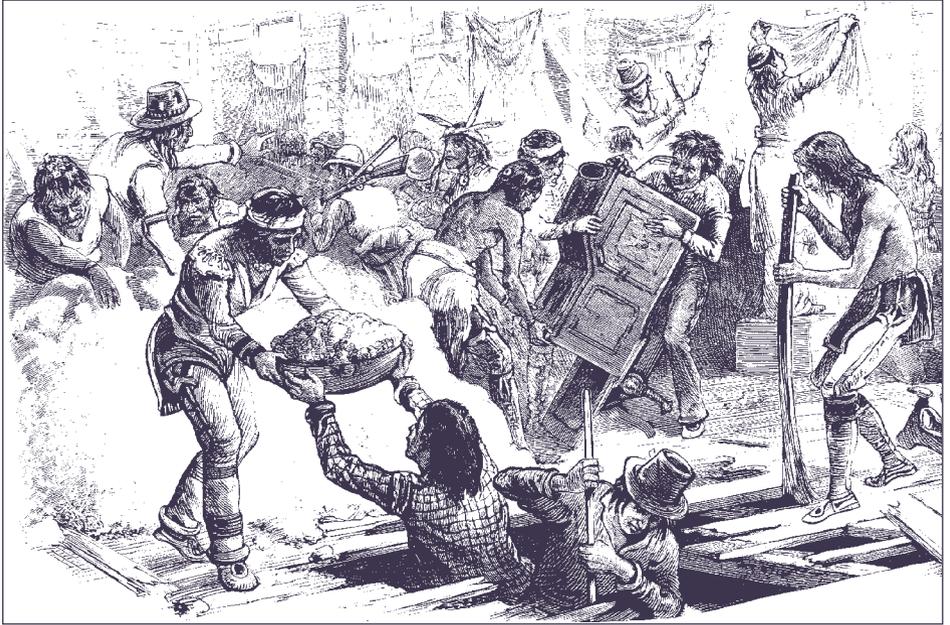
Excavation of cavalry barracks.

### **Archeology**

The Nebraska State Historical Society, as part of a plan to reconstruct the building, began an archeological excavation of the site in the summer of 1987. Excavation was conducted with the help of many volunteers, including substantial assistance provided by Earthwatch Expeditions, Inc. Excavations concluded in the summer of 1989.

Excavation revealed the outline of the foundation logs and the stone foundation piers that supported them. Interior partition walls could also be traced. Archeologists found three quite large subsurface features in the interior of the building. One was revealed to be the entrance to a root cellar constructed outside of the original building, and a second was a pit associated with a water system installed at the fort during the late 1880s. The third was a pit believed to have been dug at the time of the Cheyenne Outbreak.

When the Cheyennes were under siege within the building the army brought up cannons in an attempt to frighten the Indians into giving up their demands. Reportedly, the Cheyennes tore up the floor and dug either a trench or pits to take shelter in should the soldiers shoot through

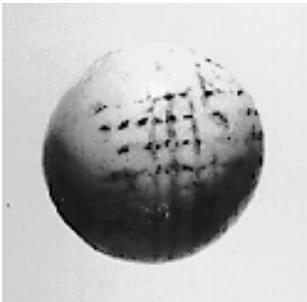


*Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, February 15, 1879.*

the walls with cannon fire. However, scholars questioned the accuracy of this information. Archeological investigations now appear to prove that at least one pit was dug. When excavated, this pit contained bits of flooring debris mixed into the backfill. The physical evidence suggests the pit was filled in by the soldiers after the outbreak and a smoldering fire lit on top of the fill, possibly in an attempt to fumigate the building to rid it of insects and other vermin.

### **Artifacts**

Most of the artifacts recovered during the excavation of the cavalry barracks site are associated with the final occupation of the building. Because it was being lived in at the time of its destruction, and only limited salvage was possible during the fire, the losses in personal property were substantial. These artifacts provide a detailed picture of the material culture of army



Marble



Cavalry insignia

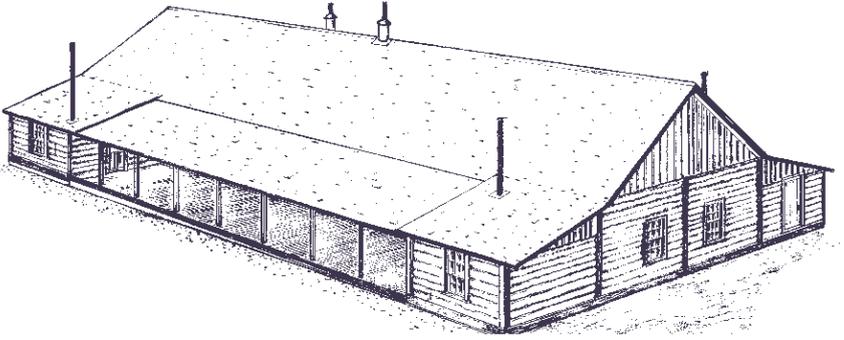


Porcelain doll head

noncommissioned officers and their families in the West just before the turn of the century. In addition to the expected military buttons, insignia, accoutrements, weapon parts, and ammunition normally associated with military structures, this excavation yielded numerous non-military artifacts related to the families of the soldiers: civilian clothing parts, jewelry, and children's toys. Items associated with food preparation and consumption and other day-to-day activities were also well represented. All of these provide a well-rounded picture of the family life associated with the final phase of the building's existence.

Of the earlier occupations, only small items that fell between the floorboards or were otherwise deposited beneath the building would have survived. One of the artifact types most easily recognizable as probably being associated with the Cheyennes is various kinds of glass beads. More than 7,000 of these were strewn throughout the building remains.

Building hardware, furnishings, and furniture parts also survived in relative abundance and will be valuable aids in the eventual accurate reconstruction and furnishing of the barracks.



Drawing by Curt Peacock

### **Reconstruction**

Funding for the eventual reconstruction of the cavalry barracks will be provided by private donations solicited by the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation. Based on the archeological information and surviving historical records and photographs, the building will be reconstructed as accurately as possible to the period relating to the Cheyenne Outbreak (1878–79). The barracks will also be furnished to that period, and an exhibit that tells the story of the Cheyenne Outbreak and other dramatic events will be included.

The reconstruction of this building will bring to completion the program initiated in 1966 by the Nebraska State Historical Society to carry out the reconstruction and interpretation of the three structures (guardhouse, adjutant's office, and cavalry barracks) associated with two major events of the Indian wars period at Fort Robinson: the death of Crazy Horse and the Cheyenne Outbreak.

### **Archeological Preservation and Opportunities for Involvement**

Over 10,000 years of human occupation in Nebraska occurred prior to written records, map making, and photography. The only way to tell the stories of ancient peoples is through archeological remains. Archeological sites are fragile and non-renewable resources. Modern land use

practices and urban expansion are taking an alarming toll on the archeological record. Looting for fun or profit is also having serious effects on significant sites. A disturbed site is nearly impossible to interpret for the benefit of science and public appreciation.

The Nebraska State Historical Society recognizes the need to balance archeological conservation and the public's desire to participate in research. This publication series is directed to that need. Several other publications that interpret Nebraska archeology are also available.



Among these, *Central Plains Archeology* is a publication jointly sponsored by the Society and the Nebraska Association of Professional Archeologists. The journal reports the results of recent archeological investigations and can be obtained at the NSHS in Lincoln. In addition, those interested in learning about volunteer opportunities are invited to contact us. The Society sponsors volunteer excavations for the general public as well as bus tours of selected archeological sites.

For more information please call the Society archeological staff at Fort Robinson at (308) 665-2918 or in Lincoln at (402) 471-4760. Our e-mail address is archnshs@nebraskahistory.org. Also, visit our website at nebraskahistory.org.

### **Additional Reading**

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