CAVALRY TRADITIONS ON THE TEXAS FRONTIER

by James T. Matthews

On the late show, John Ford’s dog-faced soldiers of the U.S. Cavalry ride forth against the Indians of the Texas frontier. Again and again, they cross the screen on campaigns of heroism and sacrifice in battle. Watching these films, it is easy to forget that duty on the frontier was more often a monotonous routine beginning when the soldiers awoke to the sound of the “morning gun,” followed by “the tap of the drum at daylight, the calling of the roll at six, the breakfast at seven, the drill at nine with another at three. . . .”1 Between drills, those soldiers not on guard assembled to perform various fatigue duties, including the cleaning and repair of equipment and buildings, hauling wood and supplies, and care of the animals. Often the heroism of the cavalryman was demonstrated by his ability to survive the boredom and discomfort of frontier life. Many of the traditions associated with the mounted service developed from efforts to combat the isolation and routine encountered while guarding the vast, unsettled lands.

Cavalry service on the Texas frontier began in 1854, when the First and Second Cavalry were authorized by Congress to patrol boundaries greatly expanded by the war with Mexico. The Second Cavalry, known as “Jeff Davis’ Own” after Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, was organized specifically for service in Texas. This was to be an offensive unit, operating from unprotected outposts, to strike out against Indian raiders wherever necessary along the frontier.2 Under field officers such as Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston, Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Lee, and Major George H. Thomas, the
Second Cavalry swiftly developed a reputation which set the standard for future cavalry service on the frontier. When the Civil War began in 1861, the Second provided sixteen general officers from members of its staff, eleven to the South and five to the North.³

During the war, most of the frontier defense commitment was fulfilled by Texas state troops. Units such as Captain Robert B. Halley’s ranger company from Bell County, known as the “Salado Mounted Troop,” were organized for service on the Texas frontier. Halley’s troop received the surrender of Camp Colorado from Captain Kirby Smith and then proceeded to Fort Chadbourne, where they relieved the U. S. troops providing garrison and patrol duties.⁴ Throughout the war, companies of Texas cavalry maintained a frontier defense which allowed other Texan men to leave their families in relative safety while they served in every major theater of operations.

Oftentimes, veterans of the Mexican War or U. S. Army service volunteered for the Confederate frontier cavalry. George A. King had joined the regular U. S. Army as a bugler at age 15 in 1847. He remained on active duty with the army until 1857, when he was discharged at Fort Stanton, New Mexico. When the Civil War began, King was offered a commission by the Union commander at Fort Stanton, which he refused. Instead, he joined Sibley’s Confederate column in the invasion of New Mexico. When the Confederate army returned to Texas, King and his family followed. He settled his family in Bell County and later raised a Confederate cavalry company from that area, which he captained.⁵

Following the war’s end in 1865, regiments of the U. S. Cavalry returned to service in Texas. Notable among these frontier troops were Colonel Ranald Mackenzie’s Fourth Cavalry, which crossed the Mexican border several times in pursuit of Indian raiders, and Colonel Benjamin Grierson’s Tenth Cavalry, a regiment composed entirely of black troops who proved themselves so well disciplined and capable in battle that the Indians openly showed their respect for these “buffalo soldiers.”

The cavalryman’s pride and his dependence on his horse often meant that his mount received first priority in care and equipage. The Confederate cavalry was often described as being well
mounted, but poorly equipped and armed. Every company recruited its own farrier, and many also had a saddler and a blacksmith on their muster rolls.6 The Second Cavalry, in purchasing horses, chose a different color for each company. Captain Earl Van Dorn’s Company A, mounted on grey steeds, became known as the Mobile Greys. This tradition continued after the Civil War. Captain Louis Carpenter’s Company H, Tenth Cavalry received orders designating them the “black horse troop” in July 1867. Each trooper was to be provided a fresh black steed, fully equipped. In this case, discrimination against the African American soldiers surfaced in the matter of supply. As Carpenter later complained to Colonel Grierson, “Since our first mount in 1867 this regiment has received nothing but broken down horses and repaired equipment as I am willing to testify. . . .”7 Some of the horses apparently were even rejected mounts from the Seventh Cavalry.

Horses were not the only animals common on a frontier outpost. Dogs followed the cavalry wherever they rode. Captain Robert G. Carter was presented a half-breed Chihuahua as a pet for his young child. The baby had just become comfortable with the dog when the Carters were presented with another pet by the men of his troop. This was “a wee, diminutive brown bear cub, but a few days old. He had small gimlet eyes and was all legs, head and
hair. The baby loved both of her pets. . . .” 8 At this time, Fort Richardson where Carter was stationed had a menagerie consisting of “a deer, two fawns, three brown bear cubs, a buffalo calf, three old bears, one coyote, two wolf pups, an eagle, two wild cats or kittens, and many half-breed wolf dogs.” 9

The regiments of cavalry formed for frontier service were usually organized into ten companies or troops, designated by the letters A through K. There was no Company J, as the letters I and J were too similar and could be easily confused on a handwritten return or muster roll. Cavalry recruits came from every possible lifestyle and occupation. Many were immigrants from Ireland, Germany, Scandinavia, or Italy. Some enlisted rather than serving prison sentences.

Unfamiliarity with military procedures often produced amusing results. In learning the routine of drill, new noncommissioned officers were heard to order their squads, “Get into rows,” or “Go endways.” A novice officer attempted to order his column left or right by yelling “Gee” or “Haw.” One raw recruit even reported to his commanding officer that he thought he heard the enemy “cocking” their cannons in preparation for the coming fight. 10

Veterans sometimes broke the daily monotony by various means of initiating the new recruits. In the Fourth Cavalry riding the buffalo calf became a tradition. The calf’s “hump made him so elusive that the recruit had no seat at any time. A camel would have been a luxurious rocking chair. By a series of wild plunges, sky rocket pitches, and catapults he . . . hit the ground with a cold dull thud.” 11 No recruit ever fully mastered the buffalo calf.

In contrast to the large scale destruction and death experienced during the Civil War, service on the Texas frontier rarely led to death in battle. At the Battle of the Wichita Village in 1858, Captain Van Dorn lost one officer and four enlisted men. Yet, this engagement is believed to have dealt a blow from which the Comanches never recovered. Still, the possibility of death was always present and soldiers knew that they “might be killed before night, and it didn’t do to let our minds rest too much on the solemnity of the fact.” 12 In the first three-and-a-half years of active service at Fort Concho, only six soldiers died of gunshot wounds.
During the same period, five died from diarrhea and dysentery, and eight from typhoid. At Fort Davis, almost twice as many soldiers reported to sick call for diarrhea as for any other single disease. It appeared that the army rations of beef, bacon, hardtack, beans, and coffee were as likely a cause of disability and death as wounds received in an Indian attack.  

Beef and bacon became the staple of the soldiers’ diet on the Texas frontier. While the meat was frequently tough, Surgeon Samuel Smith of Fort Concho attributed many of the dietary problems to the method of food preparation, lamenting, “Grease predominates and the spatter of the frying pan can be heard uttering its dulcet tones every morning, noon & night.” In the common folklore of some black regiments, the words to mess call soon became, “Soupy, soupy, soupy, widout a single bean, Po’ky, po’ky, po’ky widout a streak ob lean.” Hardtack or pilot biscuits were frequently used in frontier service due to the high cost and general unavailability of flour. This was a cause for constant discontent among the troops, who complained that the hardtack was infested by weevils, too hard to chew, and even that some portions of one issue were “distinctly dated 30 B.C.” “But hardtack was not so bad an article of food, even when traversed by insects . . . eaten in the dark, no one could tell the difference between it and hardtack that was untenanted.”  

In an attempt to vary the unappetizing ration, many gardens were cultivated on post. Officers would pool their extra funds in order to purchase occasional delicacies. Some of the items bought to make meals more appealing included clams, sardines, salmon, dried apples, dried peaches, raisins, prunes, pickles, jellies, preserves, canned milk, tomatoes, green corn, green peas, potatoes, asparagus, onions, peaches, pineapples, cranberry sauce, oysters, and various spices. Yet, the supply of fresh vegetables and items such as butter, honey, and lemons remained scarce. Hunting and fishing became very popular as methods to supplement the rations and to escape the boredom of post life. In Texas, extended hunting expeditions were organized for every type of game, from buffalo to rabbit.
Drinking and gambling were also common activities on any isolated army post. There was often no money for months in between pay periods, and gamblers were reduced to playing for tobacco, cartridges, or even clothing. When whiskey was scarce, soldiers resorted to various homemade concoctions such as “white-mule” whiskey. Its ingredients are unknown, but “it was clear and white to look upon . . . mixed with water it became milky and gave out an odor suggestive of a turpentine emulsion. Of its drunk producing properties no doubt can exist . . .”\textsuperscript{17}

The arrival of the army paymaster was anticipated not only to supplement drinking and gambling habits, but as a welcome change in the routine of army life. Troops were scheduled to be paid every two months, but on the frontier it was normally six to eight months between paydays. In the Confederate Trans-Mississippi Department, soldiers were actually paid only once in 1863, once in 1864 and not at all in 1865.\textsuperscript{18}

Even when it occurred at rare intervals, payday was a break in the monotony. Other attempts to provide a social life on post included dances, theatricals, and holiday celebrations. The Fourth of July, which was a favorite occasion at military posts across the nation, was often celebrated with horse races, foot races, and picnics. The Sixteenth Infantry band even provided entertainment for the first community Independence Day celebration in San Angelo. Cavalry troops frequently would alternate hosting dances on post, and abundant feasts of wild game were provided whenever successful hunters and fishermen returned from their expeditions.\textsuperscript{19}

Music was another important diversion in the frontier army, even if its only accompaniment available was an occasional guitar or banjo played around the campfire. Before the Civil War, each regiment was authorized to have their own band. During the war, this became impractical and the authorization was reduced to one band for every brigade. After the war, bands were no longer authorized, but they had become so vital to morale that many commanders detailed soldiers with musical ability to band duty and used personal and regimental funds to provide band instru-
ments. Despite government cutbacks, cavalry troops continued to perform their duties to such popular tunes as “The Girl I Left Behind Me” and “The Regular Army, Oh!” Some regiments had a mounted band that routinely traveled between the isolated outposts manned by the troopers. At various times during their periods of service, the Fourth and Tenth Cavalry each had a regimental band stationed at Fort Concho. Bands played when the troops entered the post or left, during formal parades, or just to entertain the garrison. Colonel Mackenzie maintained an active band throughout the Fourth Cavalry’s frontier service. While it has yet to be documented, there are tales that at least one of the band members also played the bagpipes for Mackenzie on appropriate occasions.
All of these traditional activities helped ease the rigorous boredom of frontier life during almost forty years of cavalry service in Texas. By 1875, the Comanches had been confined to reservations in Indian Territory. In January 1881, a company of Texas Rangers rode into the Sierra Diablo, engaged, and defeated the remnants of Victorio’s Apache band in the last Indian battle fought in the state of Texas. The Indian threat had vanished entirely from the Texas frontier. The rough, desolate cavalry life that had caused Robert E. Lee to despair of ever being able to have his wife join him while stationed in Texas was gone by 1890.21

In the old movies, the narrator states that wherever the cavalry went, that place became part of the United States of America. In truth, the survival of the frontier regulars on the rugged lands of West Texas did open to settlement such vast areas as the Big Bend, the Concho Valley, and the South Plains. Their outposts have long been abandoned, but in their place stand cities and towns such as San Angelo, El Paso, Abilene, Colorado City, and Jacksboro. The frontier experience was often difficult, tedious, and for most there was little glory involved. Despite these hardships, regiments like the Second, Fourth, and Tenth Cavalry and the Confederate irregulars did survive to bring settlement and civilization to the frontier regions of Texas.

Endnotes

5. *Confederate Veteran.* September, 1906. 34.


9. Ibid.


17. Ibid. 60–61.


20. Ibid. 332–340; McConnell. *Five Years a Cavalryman*, 91; Regimental Returns of the Fourth Cavalry, 1877–1889, RG 94 (National Archives).
