

FORT ROBINSON

THE COUNTRY CLUB OF THE ARMY

By Thomas R. Buecker, Curator, Fort Robinson Museum

In the tradition of the United States Army, the lifestyle and easy-going reputation found at certain military posts led veteran servicemen to informally bestow them with characteristic nicknames. In Army circles, training at the elite, yet challenging, Fort Riley Cavalry School was commonly known as “the life of Riley.” In more recent years, the Presidio of San Francisco, with its attractive setting and facilities, was deemed “the country club.” In another era, this capricious title was also applied to Fort Robinson in northwestern Nebraska.

Fort Robinson, established in 1874 to protect the Red Cloud Indian Agency, was a key military post during the Plains Indian wars. In the 1870s it was the scene of dramatic events, including the death of Crazy Horse and the tragic Cheyenne Outbreak. Because of the conspicuous role it played in the Indian wars, by the turn of the century Fort Robinson was known as a famous post that had secured its place in western American history.

Fort Robinson, unlike other western forts, was not abandoned when the frontier passed but continued on for a number of years as an active troop station. With hundreds of soldiers in garrison, diversions were necessary to occupy the men during off-duty periods. Typically those activities included various forms of outdoor recreation and sport. Many officers and enlisted men enjoyed hunting and fishing, and team sports such as baseball and football were played and watched with considerable enthusiasm. But because Fort Robinson was primarily a cavalry station, horse-related sports such as racing and polo also drew strong participation and interest.

All of this changed during World

War I. The acceptance of the tank and truck notwithstanding, the U. S. Army still needed lots of horses. No longer used as a troop station, in 1919 Fort Robinson became a Quartermaster Remount Depot. In this new role, men at the post received, conditioned and issued horses for the mounted services. Besides a change in duty, the post also witnessed a change in appearance: Many of the older adobe and frame buildings from the cavalry days were removed as new stables and horse handling facilities, newly painted white with green trim, appeared. In what were the last decades of the horse cavalry, the post took on the appearance of a Kentucky horse farm.

With the advent of automobiles, the horse gradually became less essential to mainstream Americans, particularly the growing urban majority. To many citizens, riding, jumping and other equestrian activities were viewed as recreational, almost elitist pursuits. Likewise the horse, once an integral adjunct of the U.S. Army, was considered almost obsolete by continuing mechanization. For many years, however, leisure activities at Fort Robinson continued to center around the animal.

Many found duty at the Robinson Quartermaster Depot a coveted assignment. With a smaller troop component, adequate and comfortable housing was available for both officers and enlisted men. This, plus the refreshing western climate, made the post an exceptionally desirable place to live. One, perhaps overzealous visitor, called Fort Robinson a perfect summer retreat, where the “. . . longing to leave . . . isn't simply overpowering.”

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Riding to the hounds was a common recreation for officers. By 1933, the pack contained 20 hounds; mostly French staghounds with some English fox and Welsh hounds. In the absence of foxes, the hounds trailed a coyote skin dragged through the riverbottoms.



In addition to regular horse shows and jumping competitions, races around a nearly two-mile long track were regular events at the fort. Some of the finest thoroughbred horse stock in the country were bred and raised at Fort Robinson.

As one officer recalled, the place was “horsey,” where people seldom discussed anything but horses – a veritable horse heaven. Officers were expected to ride while conducting their daily duties on the post and reservation. Upon arrival at Robinson, horses were issued to each officer and to all family members who desired mounts. All of this was expected at a place where hundreds of fine horses milled in pastures and there were sheltered feeding areas and stable corrals. Some of the finest thoroughbred horse stock in the country were bred

and raised there.

During the 1930s, the equestrian sports of racing, competitive jumping and other mounted contests were the standard fare for both officers and enlisted men. The Army urged officer participation in all forms of mounted sports to provide exercise and good training. For the enlisted men these sports encouraged and maintained interest in horsemanship and fostered unit *esprit de corps*. Some form of mounted activity was always available and Crawford residents and other

civilians regularly came out to watch and frequently to participate.

In the twentieth century, polo became the true equestrian sport in this country. The Army encouraged officers to play to improve their equestrian skills. As a result, the sport became popular at Army posts across the country. Polo play began at Fort Robinson in 1903, when the Tenth Cavalry post team won the department competition and a number of open championships.

Although polo declined at Fort Robinson after 1910, interest in the sport was revived in the 1920s. The post team played Army teams from Fort Meade, South Dakota; Fort Warren, Wyoming; Fort Logan, Colorado; and civilian teams from Denver, Colorado Springs and Hot Springs, South Dakota. At times, officers from affluent families brought their own polo ponies with them when assigned to Fort Robinson. Polo, however, was a gentlemen’s game, requiring careful observation of rules and consideration for safety of the players – it might not have been altogether popular in the enlisted ranks. Perhaps the post newspaper correspondent summed it up best when he wrote: “Can it be that the reason enlisted men don’t go in for polo is it’s a game with too much horse play?”

Along with polo, the Army saw the benefits of participation in hunt club activities. Riding to the hounds was seen as “bold riding,” giving officers experience in cross-country travel. With the arrival of Major Edwin Hardy as post commander in 1932, the Soldier Creek Hunt Club was organized. Hardy, an avid rider and outdoorsman, was master of the hunt. Two other officers with short-handled whips served as whippers-in to keep the hounds on the scent. By 1933, the Fort Robinson pack contained 20 hounds; mostly French staghounds augmented with English fox and Welsh hounds. The pack was officially recognized by the Masters of Foxhounds Association of America.

Due to the lack of foxes in the post vicinity, Hardy’s hunts were “drag hunts.” The trail of a pursued animal was simulated by dragging a coyote



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Polo was a popular equestrian sport in the early 1900s. The Army encouraged officers to play and improve their horsemanship.

hide through the creek and riverbottoms near the post and the dogs would follow the scent. Biweekly hunts were held on Wednesday and Sunday mornings, with hunt club membership open to post and local residents. The hunts often ended at the Wood Reserve (today’s Soldier Creek Wilderness Area) cabin west of the fort, where breakfast was served to all riders.

As could be expected, horse shows and competitions became an important facet of Fort Robinson life. After World War I, American officers followed the European lead where exhibition style, off-road riding and jumping were predominate sports of Army officers. By 1930, post horse shows became regular features on the Fort Robinson calendar. Besides providing excellent training and a boost to post morale, horse shows attracted hundreds of spectators to view the work of the remount service.

Such shows were frequently held in conjunction with “Quartermaster Day,” the annual celebration of the

establishment of the Quartermaster Corps. “Gymkhana,” or mounted games, where the enlisted men competed in mounted wrestling, relay races, and musical chairs, were always on the program. Equestrian skills were demonstrated in the mounted potato race, where men used pointed poles to pick potatoes from one bucket and race 50 yards to deposit them in a second.

The main features were the jumping events. Open jumping required two circuits around a course with four jumps, each three-and-one-half feet high. Competitive classes were held for both male and female riders. Hunter-jumper classes were added in 1937, and later shows brought classes for wrangling horses and cow ponies. Businesses in Crawford often closed during the exhibitions and private horses were accommodated free of charge at the post for civilian participants.

Besides horse shows and hunts, recreational riding was popular. With the rise of automobile travel, horseback riding for most Americans largely

became recreational. The rugged buttes around the post made riding exciting and aesthetically pleasing. In 1932, riding classes began to better prepare the enlisted men to perform their remount duties. Sensing an interest, Major Hardy organized a ladies riding class, to teach both how to ride cross-country and make moderate jumps.

During the remount period, one social institution common to all Army posts also existed at Fort Robinson: A favorite off-duty hangout that contributed to the post’s “country club” lifestyle was the officer’s club, the exclusive, private club for officers and their guests. Housed in the former commanding officers quarters, it was the scene of parties, dinners and other social activities. Two annual events keenly followed by radio at the club were the running of the Kentucky Derby and the Army-Navy football game. Derby day saw considerable wagering among the officers, some receiving inside information “from officers who knew prominent horses of Thoroughbred racing.”



An officer's cabin was built on the fort's Wood Reserve in 1934, complete with a large living room, guest bedrooms, sleeping porch and Spanish balcony.

In 1934 an impressive officer's cabin was built from logs on the post Wood Reserve. Complete with a large living room, guest bedrooms, sleeping porch and Spanish balcony, it became a popular retreat for post officers and visiting dignitaries. A small swimming pool, light plant and stable with quarters for attendants, completed the complex. Constructed as a Civil Works Administration project, the officer's cabin was the scene of countless parties and barbecues.

Fort Robinson was also a desired station for the enlisted ranks. Officially the post provided an excellent place for enlisted men inclined toward animal husbandry, but other perks came with duty there. With a small number of officers on staff, noncommissioned officers were housed in vacant officers' quarters. The soldiers had their own on-post social outlets with the enlisted men's and N.C.O. clubs. They also had their own recreational cabin in the Wood Reserve and participated in local league sports through the Fort Robinson Athletic Association, in addition to the aforementioned equestrian competitions.

Other "club-type" amenities were available and popular. In the 1920s, a nine-hole golf course was laid out north of the main post. By the mid-1930s, new concrete tennis courts were built for the officers and their families with a new court near the barracks added for the enlisted men. A concrete swimming

pool, costing \$5,000, was also opened, and although it had no shower or dressing facilities, proved a welcomed recreational addition. Additionally, a skeet range was built, as trap shooting became a popular pastime. With a variety of recreational outlets available, life at Fort Robinson in the 1930s stood in sharp contrast to the frontier post of 50 years earlier.

Because of its small garrison and non-combat mission, an easy-going, casual lifestyle developed at Fort Robinson. To outsiders, it might appear like a military post, but for soldiers stationed there, it did not seem like a regular Army post. The relationship between officers and enlisted men was

more informal than that found at larger posts where combat soldiers were stationed. Less emphasis was put on military bearing and uniform appearance. Even the enlisted men's mess hall looked more like a fancy restaurant than a mess hall.

This country club lifestyle and associated amenities made Fort Robinson an irresistible rest area for Army chiefs of staff, Washington politicians – even for some celebrities of the day. Major General Charles P. Summerall made stops at the post to fish and ride in the hills during his term as chief of staff. In 1936, Colonel J.J. Johnson, the chief of Remount, spent a month at the officers' cabin. Likewise, quartermaster generals and chiefs of the cavalry and artillery branches enjoyed the social life and pleasant atmosphere at the post. General Johnson Hagood, the Seventh Corps commander, spent much of his time at the fort fishing. During this period, reservation waterways were stocked by the federal Bureau of Fisheries, which operated a hatchery at Crawford. Additionally, the Army created ponds on Cherry and Soldier creeks that were periodically stocked with bass and trout. On a 1935 Thanksgiving Day outing, three officers reportedly caught 120 trout in three hours.

Prominent civilian visitors during the 1930s included sculptor Gutzon Borglum, who came to the post as a



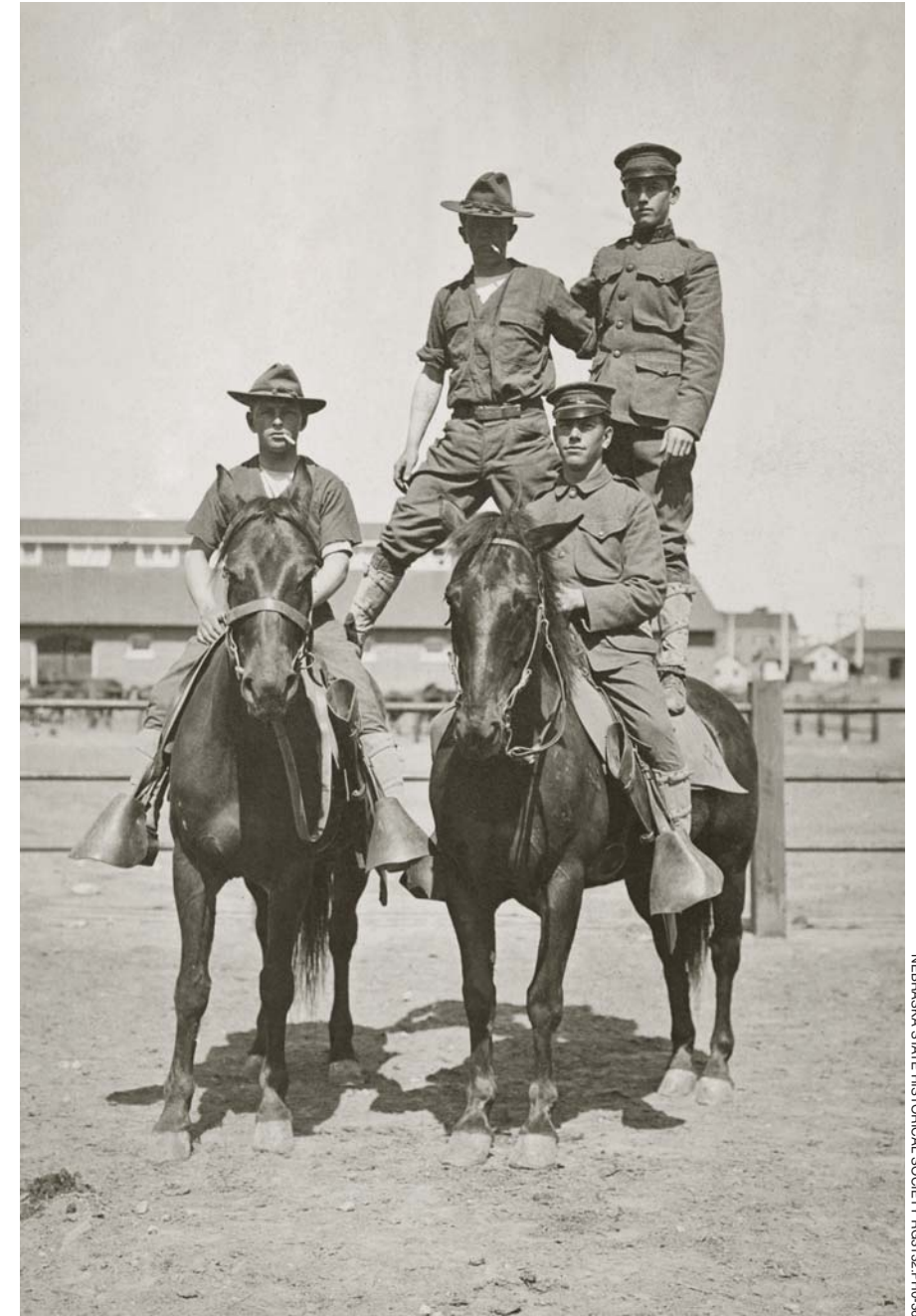
A favorite equestrian event held at the fort was jumping competitions, requiring two circuits around a course with four, 3½-foot-high jumps.

guest of post commander Major Sumner Williams on breaks from his Mt. Rushmore project. Another frequent visitor was Pierre Lorillard, head of the Lorillard Tobacco Company. Lorillard, a knowledgeable horseman, was also a reserve colonel in the Quartermaster Corps and put in part of his annual active duty time at Robinson.

The epitome of success for Fort Robinson as a world horse center came in 1935. The year before, Captain William Bradford, captain of the United States Olympic Equestrian Team, visited Fort Robinson. Hosted by Major Hardy, Bradford was impressed with both the pleasant climate and the facilities found at the post. In June 1935, the U.S. equestrian team came to Fort Robinson to train for the 1936 Berlin games. Fort Robinson was in the national spotlight, as the best of America's horsemen and horses rode and jumped there. Fort Robinson reached its zenith as an equestrian center as thousands attended special exhibitions put on by team members. Unfortunately, the team only won one medal at the 1936 games.

After Berlin, summer Olympic training at Fort Robinson continued for the next three seasons. As the 1939 session ended, however, war clouds appeared in Europe and there was no 1940 Olympic Games. During World War II, the Army dismounted its cavalry branch, effectively removing a key mission of Fort Robinson. Work with pack mules and K-9 war dogs replaced much of the horse activity. Although the world of fine horses and easy lifestyle briefly returned after war's end, the days of the country club were over, as well as the fort's use as a remount center. In 1948 the old post was abandoned by the Army, eventually to become Nebraska's largest state park.

In its last several decades as an Army post, the mission and lifestyle at Fort Robinson dramatically changed from its turbulent beginnings during the Plains Indian War. Ironically, in an era when Fort Robinson became a "country club," horse use by the Army was in an inevitable decline. As such, Fort Robinson remained one of the last



Fort Robinson was also a desired post for enlisted men during the early 1900s. Like the officers, much of their Army life and recreational time revolved around horses.

vestiges of the "old Army" between the wars, before the Army bid farewell to the horse. Today, many of the same types of recreational activities found when Fort Robinson was called "The Country Club of the Army" are available to park visitors. In this sense, a proud tradition of the old Army continues. ■

While not quite the equestrian hotbed it once was, Fort Robinson is still a horse lover's paradise. Encompassing some 22,000 acres with many miles of

trails and fire service roads to ride, Fort Robinson State Park even offers a nice campground dedicated to horse owners, complete with newly remodeled horse barns and stalls that can be rented by the night (you'll need to bring your own feed and hay). Don't own a horse? Not a problem – the park offers trail rides from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day weekend using its own string of horses. For more information call the park at (308) 665-2900 or e-mail ngpc.fort.robinson@nebraska.gov.