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Old Farm Well Near Portage Last Trace of Early Fort Winnebago Military Life

Post, Established in 1828,
Saw Colorful Days; Was
Strategic Military
Point

BY MYRTHA J. BIEHUSEN

A HUGE old well, located on the Frank Heidt farm two miles east of Portage, is the sole reminder of the glorious days of military life at Fort Winnebago, which was located there years ago. Prosaic farm buildings have one by one replaced the fort buildings which housed some of America's best known generals, the flower of her soldiery, and the finest ladies of the land.

The portage between the Fox and Wisconsin rivers has always been a most strategic point because of the enormous traffic transferred from water to water. Not only was it essential in carrying on fur trade, but it also played an important part in military operations between Fort Howard at Green Bay, and Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien.

It was for this reason that Alexander Macomb, general-in-chief of the army, in his report to the Secretary of War in 1828 urged that a military post be established here. Under the command of Major David E. Twiggs, the well, 10 feet in diameter, and 40 feet deep, was sunk in the center of a square, around which a stockade was built. Within a year, the usual fort buildings had come into existence—bakeries, stables, a hospital, commissary buildings, blacksmith shops, ice cellars, suitors' stores, magazines, laundries, bath houses, and later on even a theatre was added.

A Peaceful Fort

For a military post, the fort had a most peaceable existence, nothing like a massacre or attack ever having been staged there. Black Hawk in 1832 upon learning that a portion of the soldiers had been sent to Fort Atkinson, planned to

lead an attack against the post, but, since he was put to flight in the battle of Wisconsin Heights at Roxbury, nothing came of it.

Among the prominent men stationed at the fort was Lieutenant Jefferson Davis, who was there at its creation, and who later became president of the Confederacy. Major Twiggs, under whose command operations on the fort were begun, distinguished himself later on in the battle of Monterey. Zachary Taylor was stationed at the fort as late as 1836.

First White Woman

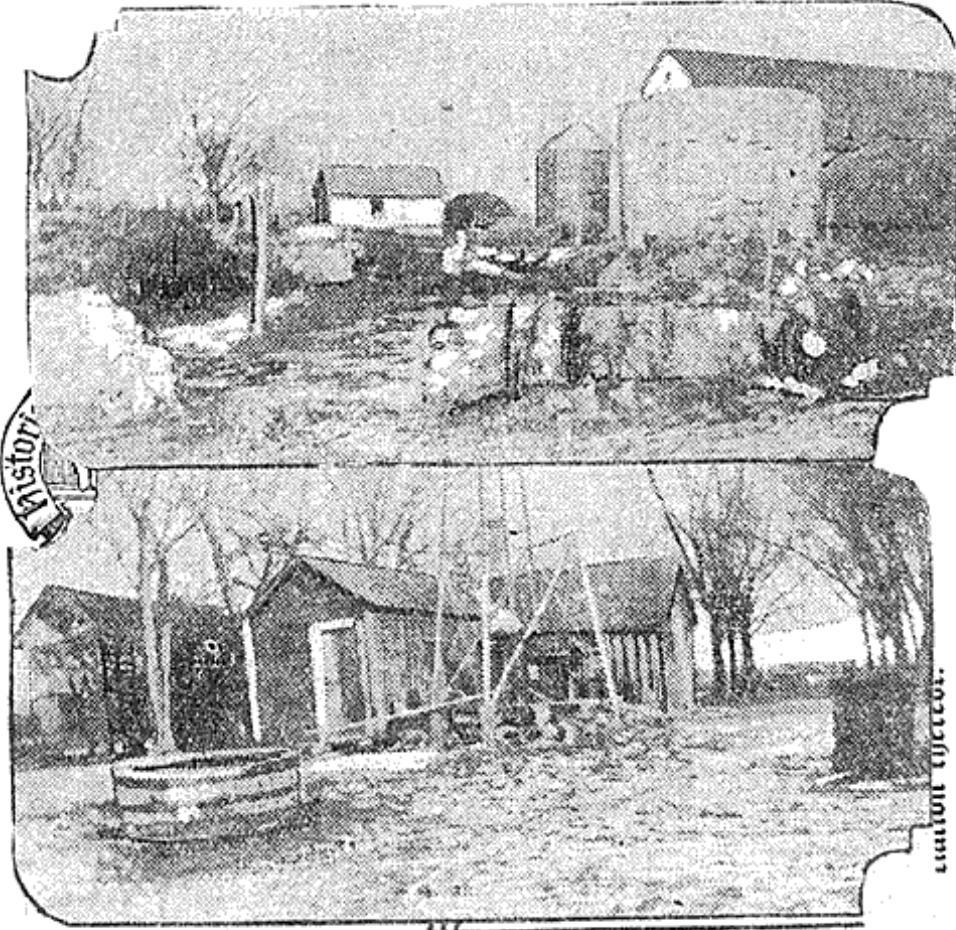
One of the big social events in the history of the military post, was the wedding of Lieutenant Horatio Van Cleve to Charlotte Quiscohsin Clark, who holds the distinction of being the first woman of pure white blood to be born within the present limits of Wisconsin.

Ladies in that day had no cars to rely on for transportation in paying their neighborly calls. Indeed, it seems that in that day a lady took her position in a canoe to pay a social call at Crawford, 118 miles down the river, with less ado than the modern girl prepares to go to the movies.

A good deal of the social life centered itself in the Indian agency house, about a mile and a half from the fort, where lived the Indian agent, John Kinzie, and his wife. When Mrs. Kinzie first arrived, she lived temporarily at the fort where the men had arranged several rooms for her. Since these quarters were not like the modern apartment, and did not exactly meet the needs of a lady, Jefferson Davis helped to alleviate circumstances by designing and constructing a piece of furniture which has ever since been called a "Davis." It served as a combination store room, clothes press, and china closet.

At The Theater

The theater, although rather a crude place, was most popular. It must have been an impressive sight to see the ladies in evening clothes,



History

Very respectfully,

R. J. Thwaites

Superintendent

Ruins of Fort Winnebago

A rubble of old masonry and parts of fire stained stone walls on the farm of Frank Heidt, two miles east of Portage, mark the all powdered and puffed, and the men in full dress uniforms passing through the doorway of the log building. Here entertainments and dramas of all kinds were presented, nor was Shakespeare neglected.

A point of particular convenience with the housekeepers of the fort was the winding course of the Fox river. An elaborate dinner could easily be prepared between the time that a boat laden with guests first made its appearance, and the time it reached the landing at the fort.

Early Religious Life

Nor was the religious welfare of the fort neglected. In the very early days the ladies conducted a Sunday school. In 1835 Miss Eliza Haight was engaged as governess for 12 children. Rev. Aratus Kent was the first clergyman to visit the fort, but his stay was short. The Rev. S. P. Keyes followed him five years later as permanent chaplain and school master.

With the Mexican war in 1845 came orders for the evacuation of the fort, and in 1853 the property was sold. One by one the buildings were moved or torn down. In 1854 the blockhouse on the northwest

historic site of old Fort Winnebago. The old fort well (below) is still practicable after almost 100 years.

corner burned to the ground. The commissary buildings and the surgeons' quarters were the last to go. Part of the old hospital is still existing as part of a farmhouse.

The old Indian agency house still stands, and is owned at the present time by Judge Baker, mayor of Portage. Right now it is vacant. Another reminder of the old days is the old military highway between Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien and Fort Howard at Green Bay. This is now a part of Highway 44.

The only other memorial is the military cemetery, located a mile from where the fort used to be. It is used as a military burial place only.