

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

FORT BOISE - (United States Army)

Number 356

August 2, 1965

Indian hostility against immigrants moving westward over the Oregon Trail prompted the United States Army to authorize the establishment of Fort Boise. Massacre of the Ward party in Boise valley in 1854 brought military retaliation against the local Indians. Increased native restlessness which naturally followed these incidents forced the Hudson's Bay Company to abandon Fort Boise, a fur trade post located where Boise River discharges into the Snake. Army escort units came out for several seasons to meet the annual immigrant parties and to protect them through the dangerous Snake country. Yet the need still was felt for a permanent military post in the vicinity of the fur traders' earlier Fort Boise. Numerous attacks in 1858 and 1859 made the situation worse. Finally, after hearing of the Otter massacre (which certainly showed the futility of the Army escort system), General George Wright formally recommended, October 10, 1860, that the United States Army erect another Fort Boise. Before his proposal could be acted upon, though, the Army got involved in the Civil War. During that conflict, national concern with the Indians of the Snake country diminished somewhat. With the gold rush to Boise Basin underway late in 1862, however, solution of the Boise Indian problem could be deferred no longer. General Benjamin Alvord suggested, October 14, 1862, that the need for Fort Boise had increased tenfold since 1860. The Governor of Washington, whose territory included all of later Idaho, firmly endorsed the request, and General Wright continued to urge immediate action. Finally, on January 14, 1863, the Secretary of War authorized the new post. General Alvord decided upon a site about forty miles up the river from the Hudson's Bay Company's earlier Fort Boise, and Major Pickney Lugenbeel left Fort Vancouver, June 1, to put the orders in effect.

Arriving in the vicinity of the new post, June 28, Lugenbeel spent several days choosing an exact site. Then he celebrated July 4 by formally locating Fort Boise. While a detachment of Oregon cavalry was working on the original log structures of Fort Boise, a town sprang up next to the post. Both the Fort and the town were intended to be permanent; aside from some settler's 1863 log cabins preserved as relics, the oldest buildings in Boise are some of those constructed for the Fort. A sandstone quartermaster's building erected September 1, 1864, still is in use as an office building more than a century later, and at least one of the other really early Fort buildings has survived.

Serving as a community center as well as a military base Fort Boise was the scene of theatrical performances, religious services, band concerts, and Christmas festivities in Boise's early days. The Fort Boise Varieties were presented for a number of years, and the soldiers

stationed at the post contributed much to the community life and development. Their primary purpose, though, was to control the Indians. An extended campaign in 1863 proved to be an unproductive search for Indians to fight. Then in 1864, Indian outbreaks over a wide area of southern Idaho and eastern Oregon set off a four year Snake war, and the headquarters of the First Oregon Cavalry under Colonel R. F. Maury was transferred to Fort Boise, August 28, 1864. Finding the offending Indians generally proved to be an insoluble problem, although exploration of a Jacksonville-Fort Boise military road by Colonel C. S. Drew during the summer of 1864 opened up a route to connect the major areas of military operations during that long struggle.

Governor Caleb Lyon held a major Indian council at Fort Boise, October 10, 1865, in an effort to bring the Indian troubles to an end. The United States Senate declined to ratify his treaties, and hostilities continued. Pressure and complaints from settlers over southwestern Idaho led to designation of Fort Boise as headquarters for a new military district of Boise, March 2, 1866, with Major L. H. Marshall in command. Camps Alvord, Lyon, Reed, and Lander were assigned to the new district, which Marshall reorganized by establishing Camp C. F. Smith and Camp Three Forks during 1866. Marshall's Indian campaigns failed, though, and General George Crook arrived at Fort Boise, December 11, 1866, to straighten things out. Crook set out on a winter campaign almost immediately, and most of the rest of the Snake War was fought in eastern Oregon and points beyond. The military district of Boise was discontinued, January 29, 1867, and with the end of the Snake War, June 30, 1868, there was talk of closing the Fort. Soldiers from Fort Boise, however, had proved useful to Governor Ballard early in 1867 when they responded to a call to protect government lamps and furniture--and incidentally, the territorial governor and secretary--from legislative displeasure which was threatening to become violent. In April, 1868, Governor Ballard employed help from the Fort to suppress the Owyhee war--a violent mining claim fracas which required the presence of soldiers in Silver City. Ballard suggested Fort Boise might be converted into a good territorial capitol or penitentiary both of which then were needed. His political adversaries proposed that the Fort (already equipped with a school anyway) was highly suitable for a campus for the University of Idaho--an institution which seemed to be less in demand just then. In response to demand from the settlers, however, Fort Boise continued as a useful military post.

During the Bannock War of 1878 and the Sheepeater campaign of 1879, Fort Boise served as a base of operations in Idaho's final Indian wars. On April 5, 1879, however, the Fort was redesignated Boise Barracks, where Army units were stationed until 1912. More than one notable military figure was stationed at Fort Boise, including General Jonathan Wainwright who served there early in his military career. Soldiers returned there in 1916 preparing for the Mexican border campaign, and the barracks saw military use again from 1942 through 1944. In the meantime, a veterans hospital occupied the main part of the grounds from 1920 on; finally, on March 14, 1944, the property not needed for the hospital was ordered turned over to the State of Idaho.

Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428