

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REFERENCE SERIES

CAMP LYON

Number 357

July 16, 1965

Military operations during the Snake War (1864-1868) required the garrisoning of a substantial number of forts and camps scattered over a broad region of hostilities: southwestern Idaho, eastern Oregon, northern Nevada, and northeastern California. One of these fortifications was Camp Lyon, named for Nathaniel Lyon, a controversial Army general who stirred up a great commotion in Missouri at the beginning of the Civil War. Indian restlessness threatened a number of roads serving mining centers such as Owyhee and John Day: in the case of Owyhee, important California interests brought pressure upon General George Wright, commander of the department of the Pacific, to provide better protection for new roads from Red Bluff and Chico to Silver City and Boise. Prominent Californians such as Congressman John Bidwell and Army road builder John Mullan also brought pressure. Indians also menaced the Humboldt and Red Bluff-Chico routes, Major General McDowell sent out orders, May 6, 1865, for the Oregon cavalry and infantry to establish what became Camp Lyon at the site chosen "with regard to wood, water, and grass. . . ." Troops stationed at the new post were to "be considered in the field, and no purchase of lumber or other building material" was permitted. By this time Hill Beachey's Humboldt stage line, running a two-hundred mile gauntlet of "hostile savages," had to suspend operations temporarily after losing fifty-seven horses to the enterprising Indians. Second Lieutenant Charles Hobart, therefore, set out from Fort Boise, June 19, 1865, and found a site on Cow Creek suitable for the new camp. He thought his location was in Idaho not far from the Oregon line; later, the boundary surveyors disclosed Camp Lyon to be directly on the state line, with most of the buildings on the Oregon side. Formally established June 27, Camp Lyon was maintained until well after the Snake War had ended.

Within a week, Hobart with his Oregon cavalry set out on an extended search for the stolen stock. Leaving Camp Lyon July 2, they followed the stock trail up the Malheur and got a long way into Oregon during their difficult search for the offending Indians, who "concealed themselves so effectually" that several days went by before a battle finally occurred near Pilot Rock. Most of the Snake War, in fact, took the form of searching for Indians who proved to be exceptionally hard to find. Yet at times, the natives would strike in force. More often, they simply picked off an isolated stage. War meetings in Silver City, February 14, 1866, arranged for parties of local citizens to go Indian hunting when the military companies from Fort Boise and Camp Lyon seemed entirely unable to make much headway themselves. Loud complaints naturally resulted from this situation. Finally, Major Louis H. Marshall was sent out March 2, 1866, to take command at Fort Boise of the new military district of Boise. He concluded that his

new district needed reorganization and expansion. Camp Lyon survived this rearrangement. Camp Alvord at the base of Steen's Mountain was closed and replaced by a new post on White Horse Creek, which Marshall named Camp C. F. Smith, April 20. In addition, he recommended two more new camps, one on the lower Bruneau, and the other at Three Forks of the Owyhee. Then, after the Indians on lower Jordan Creek had wiped out two bands of Chinese (ninety-four altogether) on their way to Boise, May 19, Major Marshall went out to search for the offenders himself. Meeting a strong force in a four-hour battle at Three Forks, he suffered an unanticipated defeat, May 23. This reverse helped to insure that Camp Lyon, along with the newer posts, would be needed for some time yet.

Raids on Flint, Oro, and South Mountain followed early in June, and volunteers who took off after the offending Indians found themselves besieged on Boulder Creek, July 2. Six days went by before they could be relieved, and although Major Marshall kept out in the field hunting Indians, he could not prevent incidents such as an ambush of the Chico-Owyhee stage, July 14. Eventually Major General Frederick Steele grew disturbed enough that he came out to examine the situation personally, visiting Camp Lyon in September. Shortly after that, arrangements were made to have General George Crook come out to Fort Boise and take command of the situation.

Crook put new life into the Army's prosecution of the Snake War. Leaving Fort Boise shortly before Christmas, he set out on a hard winter campaign that brought him to Camp Lyon in the middle of January. There he found conditions deplorable. Later he reported that "From appearance and information the normal condition of the officers there was drunkenness. They didn't seem to do much else but get drunk and lie around doing nothing." Crook sent the Indians held captive at Camp Lyon to Fort Boise, and set off with the cavalry company that had been stationed at Camp Lyon, January 21. Before long, he was fighting a major battle with a band of the Owyhee-Steen's Mountain Indians, capturing the survivors of this hard fought engagement. From then on, most of his energy was spent farther west. While Crook was campaigning, hostilities still plagued the Camp Lyon area at times. By the summer of 1868, he had managed to bring the Indian troubles to an end. Camp Lyon lasted for almost a year after the Snake War terminated. Finally, on March 15, 1869, the post was ordered abandoned. This was accomplished on April 27, and from then on, Camp Lyon survived only as a cattle ranch. The buildings are all gone, although on a hill directly to the north of the old camp stands a cabin reputedly built from materials salvaged at Camp Lyon. Other than that--and the military cemetery which still is located on the old camp grounds--little but a sign remains to mark the site of this old Army post.

Information provided by Jerry Stanke.

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