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CAMP THREE FORKS

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While inspecting the Owyhee Country during the Snake War in the fall of 1866, Major General Frederick Steele authorized the installation of two additional camps as bases for guarding the new Minear Road from Silver City via Three Forks to Nevada and California. Choosing a site on Soldier Creek at the southwestern base of South Mountain, he directed his Brevet Lt. Col. John J. Coppinger to establish a winter camp there, "and to build a block house at the Three Forks." Following these orders, Coppinger established Camp Winthrop on Steele's Soldier Creek site, September 26, 1866. Somehow he didn't get around to building the block house at Three Forks across the Oregon line about sixteen miles south of Camp Winthrop. Since Minear's grade up the canyon wall immediately south of Three Forks proved to be entirely impractical--except, legend has it, for stages lowered down over the cliff with ropes, a cumbersome system tried only once--the lack of a block house at Three Forks scarcely bothered the road users. A stage line or two operated for a time through Three Forks and up the river in the canyon instead of up the impassable canyon wall, but the route never was too popular. In any event, the demand for a post at Three Forks location was solved quite neatly the next April, simply by renaming Camp Winthrop as Camp Three Forks. More than a little confusion eventually rose from this change in name, particularly because the post finally called Three Forks turned out to be quite a distance from the site for which it was named.

Camp Three Forks on Soldier Creek proved to be a useful military base during the Snake War even if there was not too much traffic requiring protection on the road. Almost a year after he had established the camp, Coppinger went out on a successful raid against the Indians, August 12-14, 1867. Wiping out a village his scouts found after chasing some Indians down Soldier Creek to the Owyhee, Coppinger gained a considerable reputation around Silver City. (Later he went on to become commanding general of the department of the Platte, and finally a major general in Cuba during the Spanish-American War.) After the Snake War came to an end, June 30, 1868, Camp Three Forks continued to function as a military prison for six months more. Then the Indian captives held there were transferred to Fort Boise where supplies were more readily available. With hostilities largely concluded, Camp Three Forks continued with a rather small force: by March 1870,

only eighty men were stationed there. At last, the army disregarded local protests and closed Camp Three Forks entirely, October 23, 1871. The whole installation was auctioned off for ninety dollars, and became a cattle ranch. Although the buildings are abandoned, a cattle ranch still is to be found on Soldier Creek only a mile below the old camp. The one standing building has been altered somewhat, and is in poor repair. Yet it still bears an identifiable resemblance to a picture taken in May, 1868, by a Silver City photographer--although the cannon (on which Colonel Coppinger was seated in the 1868 picture) together with the soldiers and other things which gave the post a military appearance in 1868, are long since gone.