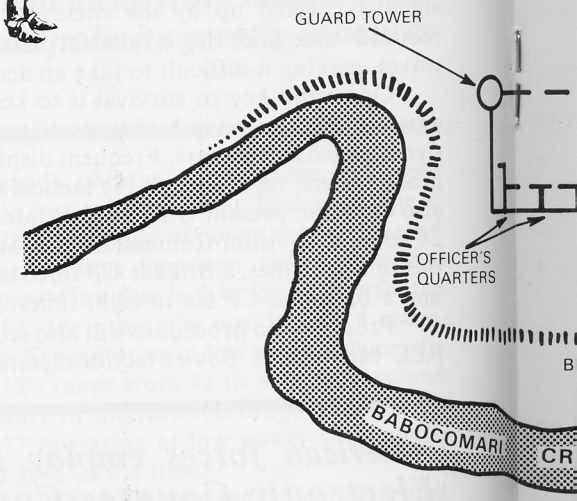
Record Traffic From The Past



Ghost

by Capt. Harry G. Cramer

Fort Huachuca, Arizona, is well-known to most signaleers as the headquarters of the Army Communications Command. Many are aware of Fort Huachuca's colorful history since its establishment in 1877 and its role in the Apache campaigns, Mexican border troubles, and troop-training for the World Wars. Probably very few are aware, however, of the presence of a ghost fort only a few miles away, a long-abandoned outpost which predates Huachuca by more than a decade and whose story adds an almost forgotten chapter to the history of the US Army in the Southwest.

Camp Wallen, as this outpost was known, is located at the foot of the Mustang Mountains, midway between Fort Huachuca and the present-day town of Elgin. It was established in the spring of 1866 by Regular Army troops who were returning to the Arizona Territory after a long absence necessitated by the Civil War in the East. During the Army's absence, warring Apaches had devastated the region and so the Army sought to place an outpost in the heart of "Apacheria" and thus keep watch on the hostile Chiricahua tribe.

Company G, 1st United States Cavalry, established Camp Wallen on May 9, 1866. Led by Lieutenant John McDonald, they arrived on the Babocomari Creek (then known as the Upper San Pedro River) and pitched their tents among the ruins of an ancient Spanish hacienda they found on the north bank. The hacienda itself had an interesting history. It had been built by Don Ignacio and Dona Eulalia Elias, wealthy ranchers who received a grant of 130,000 acres of valley land from the Mexican government in 1832. The Elias family tried raising cattle on this ranch, which they named San Ignacio del Babocomari, but because of Apache raids, their home soon took on the appearance of a military fortress. Elias surrounded his house with fifteen-foot high adobe walls, crowned by huge turrets at the corners, to protect the lives and property of his family. Indian attacks nevertheless took their toll, and after the deaths of two Elias brothers, the family abandoned the ranch in 1849. Today, a bronze plaque, located at the intersection of Highway 82 and the Elgin turn-off, describes the history of this land grant.

McDonald's little command took advantage of the shelter and protection of this old hacienda, establishing their own camp within the protection of its walls. Initially called "New Post on Upper San Pedro," the camp was soon renamed in honor of Colonel Henry D. Wallen, commander of the District of Northern Arizona. Once settled, Lt. McDonald dispatched a squad to guard the stage station at San Pedro Crossing (present-day Benson) and sent out two patrols to scout for Apaches. The soldiers found no Apaches, but the Apaches certainly found them. On the last day of May, a large raiding party of Chiricahuas struck Camp Wallen and succeeded in running off the entire herd of horses and cattle. A patrol chased the raiders toward the Huachuca Mountains, but failed to recover the livestock.

This incident underscored the vulnerability of such a small garrison stationed in the midst of Apache country with no help near at hand. Consequently, reinforcements were sent to beef up Camp Wallen. While horses were brought down from Tucson to remount the cavalry, Brevet Major William H. Brown marched overland from Camp Bowie with Company E, 14th Infantry and assumed command. Finding the soldiers at Wallen still living in tents, Major Brown put the troops of both companies to work making adobe bricks. Under his supervision, the soldiers constructed a hospital, guardhouse, three storehouses, barracks and messrooms, quartermaster store, sutler's store, and commander's quarters.

While Major Brown made physical construction of the post his prime goal, the cavalry lieutenants who served under him took to the field in pursuit of hostile Indians.

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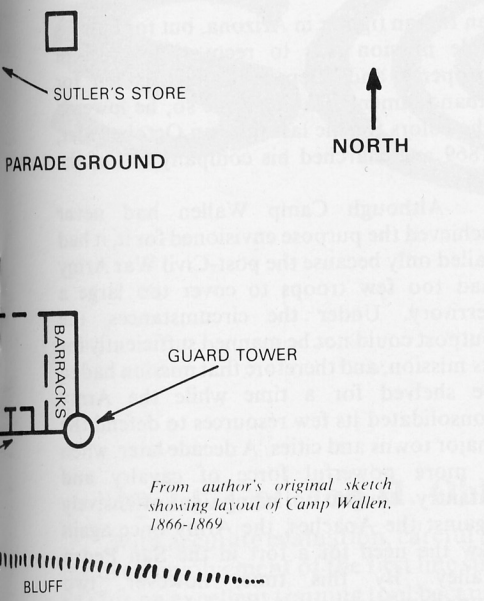
Though old Fort Wallen had a non-military tenant in 1899, it still looked remarkably unchanged from earlier times. Some of the original work of the Elias brothers, the strictly military fortifications and expansions under Major Brown, and the patch-ups and alterations of successive military and civilian tenants, blend together in timeless harmony in the desert under the same merciless sun.



From author's original sketch showing layout of Camp Wallen, 1866-1869

post

Throughout the summer and fall of 1866, Lt. William H. Winters led numerous forays as far west as the Santa Cruz Valley and eastward to the New Mexico border. He employed as his scout Merijilda Grijalva, a Mexican who had been kidnapped as a child and raised by Chiricahua Apaches. Mary Hilda, as the troopers called him, was a shrewd scout who knew both the terrain and the enemy, and taught the soldiers many valuable lessons. One of his first was teaching the soldiers to prepare jerked beef and pinole for long patrols. These foods weighed less and did not spoil as easily as the standard Army field rations. By lightening their load of rations, the cavalrymen increased the range of their patrols, and were thus able to surprise and overwhelm an Apache raiding party in the Pedregosa Mountains in December 1866.

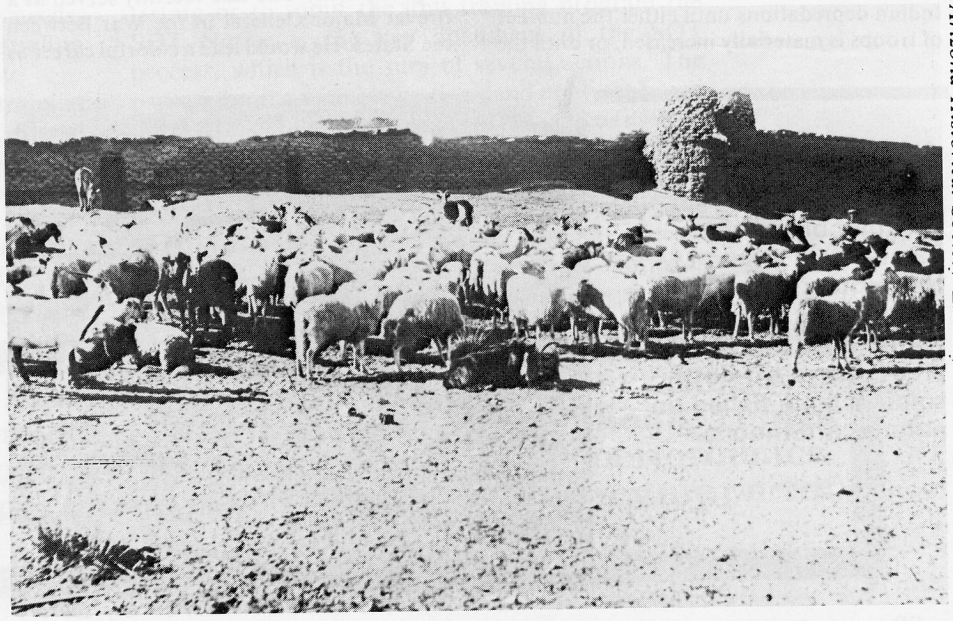
A month later Lt. Jeremiah Harrington replaced Winters as commander of the cavalry troop. If anything, he was even more aggressive than his predecessor and soon argued with Maj. Brown over the daily labor of the enlisted men. Harrington felt that too much time was devoted to the construction project and not enough for drill and combat training. Maj. Brown was under tremendous pressure to complete construction, but conceded that more time should be devoted to military training and directed Harrington to do so. The lieutenant soon set the troops to clearing a parade ground and a mounted drill field and setting up targets for marksmanship and saber practice. Ditches and hurdles were devised to challenge horsemanship. The infantry trained alongside the cavalry in these events, for it was Harrington's intention to mount the foot-soldiers on spare horses and thus reinforce the cavalry patrols with several squads of "mounted rifles."

Proficiency in soldierly skills soon rose and so did the camp's morale. As hard as the rigors of patrolling might be, the soldiers found it preferable to fatigue details within the cantonment. The cavalry patrolled aggressively throughout the spring of 1867, averaging forty to fifty miles a day in the rough and arid terrain. Apache Indians attacked the mining camp at Mowry in March, killing one miner and severely wounding Camp Wallen's mail rider, Oscar Buckalew. Soldiers from the fort chased the attackers for five days but eventually lost the trail. Several patrols went out in April and May without result.

In June, Lt. Harrington led another patrol against the Apaches, but this time he was determined not to return empty-handed. He marched his troop directly to the Chiricahua Mountains, where collision with Apache warriors was inevitable. With Grijalva riding point, the soldiers made forty miles a day in the midsummer heat, alternately riding and walking their exhausted horses. They forded the San Pedro River, crossed the dry alkali flats of the Sulphur Springs Valley and ascended a canyon on the west slope of the Chiricahuas. At dawn on June 21st, they performed a rare feat: they surprised a large village of Chiricahua Apaches.

A desperate fight ensued. At first the Apaches fled up the rocky hillsides, panicked by a mounted cavalry charge. The Camp Wallen troops dismounted and pursued on foot, leaving every fourth man to hold the horses in the rear of the skirmish line. This continued for some time; the skirmishers steadily working their way uphill using rocks and trees for cover. The Apache warriors withdrew slowly, shouting obscenities at their attackers. Grijalva, raised by the Apaches and wise in their way of warfare, suddenly warned Lt. Harrington: the Chiricahuas were baiting a trap and the lieutenant should pull his skirmishers back to the picket line. Harrington did so immediately. No sooner had the skirmishers fallen back to the horses than a group of Apaches, who had circled to the rear, sprang from a ravine to attack the herd. They were met by a crashing volley of carbine fire and the battle ended as suddenly as it had begun. The Apaches, thoroughly routed, retreated to the hills leaving the soldiers in possession of their village. Harrington's men picked up

Camp Wallen, Arizona, the predecessor of Fort Huachuca as it appeared about 1880-1890. Abandoned by Army troops in 1877, the time and battle worn adobe walls and towers now protect a non-military tenant, and the sun scorched, arid and scarcely vegetated land graze the tenant's goat and sheep herd.



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Traces of Fort Huachuca's predecessor are still visible on the north bank of the Babocomari Creek, a few miles northwest of the modern post. The once-tall watchtowers have melted into mounds of adobe and the sheltering walls are now only traces of foundation in the sage-covered earth.

what souvenirs and weapons they could carry, set fire to the remainder of the Apaches' possessions and returned to Camp Wallen in high spirits. Not a single soldier had been lost in the fight.

This raid had been a bold exploit and a singular success, but proved to be Camp Wallen's "last hurrah." A major debate was brewing at that time as to whether the Army should disperse its troops in a large number of small outposts, or whether it should concentrate its forces in a smaller number of larger garrisons. There were advocates of both viewpoints: those who favored dispersion felt that it would provide at least some protection in every corner of the frontier, while the supporters of concentration felt that only this course would give the Army the opportunity to maneuver large field forces against the hostiles. In Camp Wallen's case it was obvious that two small companies, totalling less than ninety men, could not possibly mount an effective campaign unassisted. Harrington himself commented, "This country will continue to be the theater of Indian depredations until either the number of troops is materially increased, or until the posts are so centralized and consolidated that scouts can be organized of sufficient force." The Inspector General of the Military Division of the Pacific, reasoning along similar lines, soon recommended that Camp Wallen and neighboring Camp Tubac be abandoned and their garrisons used to reinforce other camps in the territory. In the spring of 1868, both of Camp Wallen's companies were ordered to join the garrison at Fort Lowell in Tucson and active campaigning from Camp Wallen ceased.

The outpost lingered for another year, primarily to keep watch over the nearby stage stations and to provide escorts for the Army paymaster. These details were carried out by a much-reduced complement, consisting of Capt. George Downey's Company C, 32d Infantry. Eventually this unit transferred to Camp Crittenden and was replaced in turn by an even smaller outfit. Company K, 21st Infantry was a force of only twenty-five men, led by Lt. William Ross, an interesting character in his own right. He was a Second Lieutenant of the Regular Army who had recently served as a Brevet Major General in the War Between the States. He would lead a colorful career as an Indian fighter in Arizona, but for now his sole mission was to recover government property and prepare Camp Wallen for abandonment. Having done so, he lowered the colors for the last time on October 31st, 1869 and marched his company out of the fort.

Although Camp Wallen had never achieved the purpose envisioned for it, it had failed only because the post-Civil War Army had too few troops to cover too large a territory. Under the circumstances, the outpost could not be manned sufficiently for its mission, and therefore that mission had to be shelved for a time while the Army consolidated its few resources to defend the major towns and cities. A decade later, when a more powerful force of cavalry and infantry sought to campaign offensively against the Apaches, the Army once again saw the need for a fort in the San Pedro Valley. By this time, however, two complications prevented the reoccupation of Camp Wallen.

First, the heirs of the Elias family had filed suit in US courts for title to the Babocomari land grant, thus placing the ownership of Camp Wallen in question. Second, the new post was to be considerably larger than the old and common sense demanded it be located closer to the ready source of timber in the Huachuca Mountains. Thus, when the Army reestablished itself on the upper reaches of the San Pedro in 1877, the vacant barracks at Camp Wallen were discarded in favor of a new outpost to be known as Camp Huachuca.

Traces of Fort Huachuca's predecessor are still visible on the north bank of the Babocomari Creek, a few miles northwest of the modern post. The once-tall watchtowers have melted into mounds of adobe and the sheltering walls are now only traces of foundation in the sage-covered earth. The tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad bisect the parade field where Lt. Harrington once drilled his troopers. Very little water now flows in the creek where off-duty soldiers once fished on autumn afternoons. All in all, the visitor finds sharp contrast to Fort Huachuca, visible in the distance, with its tall buildings and microwave dishes. Picking up a rusted horseshoe from among the brush where the stables once stood, he might turn to hear the distant droning of a Mohawk, cruising like a lazy dragonfly in the afternoon haze. The changes of a hundred years are staggering; the forty miles once covered by a cavalry patrol between dawn and dusk could now be flown by one of Fort Huachuca's planes in minutes. A century has passed and it is a new era, a new world, a new Army. But its roots — separated by the span of only a few generations — lie here.

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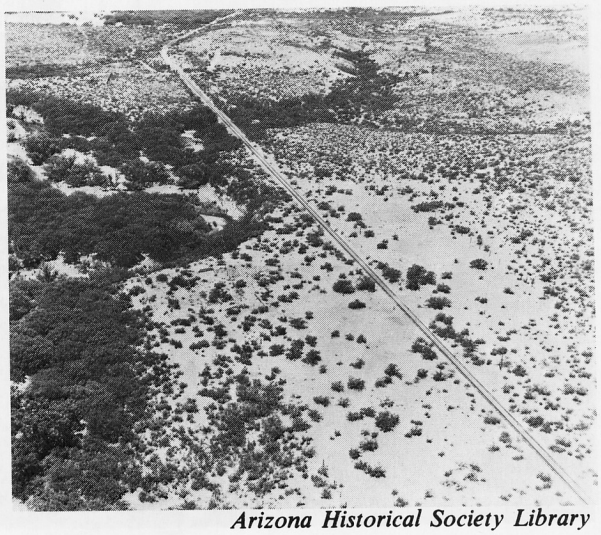

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