

Potpourri Of Fort Laramie Facts

As children, we are brought up on a steady diet of western folklore. Cowboys and Indians, soldiers, fur trappers and emigrants are all familiar characters to us. For the most part, they are nothing more than myth - fleeting characters on the big screen or the family television set. There was a place, however, where myth and reality merged; a place where the great events of the opening of the frontier were played out on a grand scale; a place where the list of characters who passed through read like a Who's Who of western history. This place was Fort Laramie, truly the crossroads of the American West.

Significant Characters Who Passed Through Fort Laramie

Robert Stuart - The first known white person to visit the site that would eventually become Fort Laramie. Stuart and his traveling companions camped at the mouth of the Laramie River on December 22, 1812 on their return trip to St. Louis from Fort Astoria, Oregon. Stuart inadvertently discovered the route that would later become the Oregon Trail.

Jacques Laramee - A French fur trapper, rumored to have been killed by Indians on the stream that would take his name. Laramee is a shadowy character of whom we know very little. However, he now has a river, fort, town, city, county, mountain range, a peak, and plains all named after him.

Jedediah S. Smith - Famous mountain man and one of the first to exploit the fur resources of the Fort Laramie region. He led William H. Ashley's expedition into the central Rocky Mountains in 1823.

Thomas Fitzpatrick - Also known as Broken Hand, co-led the Ashley expedition with Jed Smith. Fitzpatrick became one of the best known of the mountain men. He purchased Fort William with his associates in the spring of 1835. Later he served as a guide for the first true emigrant wagon train, the Bidwell-Bartleson party, in 1841. In 1847, he was appointed as Indian Agent to the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux, and in 1851, was instrumental in the success of the "Horse Creek" Treaty.

James Bridger - Probably the most famous of the mountain men and a frequent visitor to Fort Laramie. Bridger gained most of his fame as a fur trapper but was also much sought after as a competent guide by emigrants and military alike. In his later years, Bridger spent many hours at Fort Laramie, "spinning yarns" for anybody who would listen. He is rumored to have had a room in the Post Trader's Store, where he wintered in 1867 while recovering his health.

Kit Carson - Although Carson's fame was gained mostly on the Southern Plains, he nevertheless passed through Fort Laramie on many different occasions. Like most of the other famous guides of the period, Carson got his start in the fur trade. One of the little known phases of Carson's career was as a sheepman. He passed through Fort Laramie in 1853 with 6,500 head in route to California where he could turn a 100% profit.

Robert Campbell & William Sublette - Formed a partnership in 1832 to compete in the fur trade. After being driven from the Upper Missouri, the partners became active in the central Rocky Mountain fur trade. Sensing a change in the fur trade industry, Campbell and Sublette decided to erect a fixed trading post to take advantage of the buffalo trade with the local

natives. Campbell and Sublette selected the junction of the North Platte and Laramie Rivers for their new post - Fort William, the first Fort Laramie. Campbell later went on to become active in Indian affairs. He attended the Treaty Council of 1851 and was appointed to the Board of Indian Affairs in 1869. Sublette added to his fame as a guide when he led Sir William Drummond Stewart's party in 1843.

Alfred Jacob Miller - Accompanied Sir William Drummond Stewart on his 1837 expedition. Miller was an accomplished artist. Among Miller's portraits of the western landscape through which he passed, are drawings and paintings of Fort William. Thus, he became the first artist to record the Fort Laramie landscape. His work now resides in some of the most renowned art galleries in the country.

Donner Party - This famous company of emigrants passed through Fort Laramie in 1846. They were destined to be remembered because of the fateful decision to take the Hastings Cutoff south of the Great Salt Lake. This decision caused travel delays that allowed the train to get caught in the mountain snows of the High Sierra. Of the original 81 in the party, only 45 survived the tribulations of the winter. Thirty-six members of the company either froze or starved to death.

Francis Parkman - At age 23, he made his famous journey on the Oregon Trail, "a tour of curiosity and amusement." As a product of this trip, he published *The Oregon Trail*, in 1849, an American classic. During this trip, he stopped at Fort Laramie and left a vivid description of life at the post. Parkman later went on to write an eight volume history of France and England in North America, as well as the *History of the Conspiracy of the Pontiac*.

John C. Fremont - United States Army officer, passed through Fort John - the second Fort Laramie - in July of 1842 on his first expedition to the Rocky Mountains. Fremont recommended the site of Fort Laramie in his report of the expedition as a logical choice for a military post. Fremont visited Fort Laramie again in 1847, while being escorted east for his court martial by General Stephen Watts Kearny.

Colonel Stephen W. Kearny - In the spring of 1845, Kearny was detailed to take five companies of dragoons as far as South Pass to impress the Indians and to study problems associated with overland travel. On June 16th he met 1200 Sioux at Fort Laramie and told them not to disturb the emigrants or molest their persons or property. He then "fired several shots with his howitzer, followed at darkness by a burst of rockets to tell the Great Spirit that they had listened to his words."

Brigham Young - Leader of the Mormon pioneer movement. He led the first group of Mormons to their Zion, the valley of the Great Salt Lake, in 1847. Young and this first group of pioneers camped near Fort Laramie on June 1, 1847. Brigham Young conceived and implemented the handcart system in 1856.

Whitmans and Spauldings - Dr. Marcus Whitman, his wife Narcissa, Reverend Henry Spaulding and his wife Elizabeth, were members of a missionary party that traveled West with a group of traders in 1836. On this trek they became the first party to take a wagon overland to Oregon. Narcissa and Elizabeth were the first white women to visit Fort Laramie. It was Dr. Whitman who, on his first trip to the west in 1835, surgically removed a three-inch arrowhead from the back of Jim Bridger at the rendezvous that year. The Whitmans and Spauldings went on to establish a Presbyterian mission in Oregon. In November, 1847, the

Whitman mission was attacked by Cayuse Indians. Marcus and Narcissa were killed in the raid.

Bidwell-Bartelson Party - Passed through Fort Laramie on June 22, 1841, en route to California. This group of emigrants would constitute the vanguard of the migration to the West Coast.

Father Pierre Jean DeSmet S.J. - Probably the most notable of all the missionaries who ventured into the Great American West. Father DeSmet first visited Fort Laramie (Fort William) on June 4, 1840 - the last year that fort existed. On July 25, 1840, Father DeSmet celebrated the first Catholic mass in Wyoming. DeSmet returned to Fort Laramie in 1851, to attend the treaty council, and was instrumental in successfully completing the negotiations. While at the council, he baptized no less than 988 participants.

Lieutenant Daniel P. Woodbury - Officer of the Corps of Engineers, detailed to locate a fort somewhere in the vicinity of Laramie's Fork on the North Platte River. After surveying a number of sites in the vicinity, Woodbury choose the site occupied by Fort John - the second Fort Laramie. On June 26, 1849, Woodbury purchased the old fur trading post for \$4,000, and thus it officially passed into the hands of the U.S. Army and became Fort Laramie.

Brevet 2nd Lieutenant John L. Grattan - Impetuous young officer of the Sixth U.S. Infantry. On August 19, 1854, Grattan was put in command of a detachment of 29 enlisted men and an interpreter and was sent to arrest a Miniconjou Indian for supposedly stealing and killing an emigrant's cow in a Brule Indian camp eight miles east of Fort Laramie. It is unknown exactly what transpired at the Indian village, which may have contained as many as 4,000 people. Fighting broke out, claiming the life of Chief Conquering Bear, Grattan, the 29 enlisted men, and the interpreter. Most historians acknowledge this to be the first major battle of the Northern Plains Indian Wars.

General William S. Harney - On September 3, 1855, Harney lead his troops to Ash Hollow, Nebraska, where Little Thunder and his band of Brules were encamped on Blue Water Creek. Harney attacked the village in retaliation for the Grattan fight a year earlier. Harney killed 86 Indians and took another 70 women and children captive. Harney then proceeded to Fort Laramie for a council with a delegation of Sioux chiefs. Harney threatened the Indians with continuing military action if any further depredations occurred along the trail. Harney again played a significant role in Plains Indian affairs in 1868 as part of the Indian Peace Commission held at Fort Laramie.

Ordnance Sergeant Leodegar Schnyder - One of the least known but most significant figures in the history of Fort Laramie. Schnyder arrived at Fort Laramie with Company G, 6th U.S. Infantry, on August 12, 1849. He was appointed as assistant post librarian on September 17, 1851. Schnyder was promoted to the rank of Post Ordnance Sergeant on December 1, 1851. On September 17, 1859, he was appointed Garrison Postmaster, concurrent with his other duties. Despite requesting transfers on numerous occasions, Schnyder did not leave Fort Laramie until the fall of 1886. Schnyder retired in 1890. Ordnance Sergeant Schnyder holds the record for the longest term of service at Fort Laramie, 37 years, and is among the record holders for the longest term of service in the U.S. Army for an enlisted man - a total of 53 years.

Spotted Tail (Sinte Galeska) - Chief of the Brule Sioux. Spotted Tail was born in 1823, and frequented the Fort Laramie region both as a child and as an adult. Spotted Tail was considered one of the greatest Sioux chiefs of his period. He was a brilliant orator, as well as a distinguished warrior. Lt. Eugene Ware states that Spotted Tail had counted 26 coups in personal combat. Spotted Tail was considered a peace chief. After witnessing the destruction of his village by General Harney in 1855, he recognized the futility of war with the whites. However, he was consistently an outspoken advocate for the rights of his people. Perhaps the most notable of Spotted Tail's many visits to Fort Laramie occurred in 1866, when he came to bury his daughter.

Wheat Flour (Ah-ho-ap-pa) - Ah-ho-ap-pa was the daughter of the Brule Chief Spotted Tail. Legend has it that she was enamored by the white way of life. She reputedly fell in love with an army officer at Fort Laramie, but was separated from him when he was transferred to another post. Apparently one of Ah-ho-ap-pa's favorite pastimes was watching the soldiers at formal dress parades. Although much of her life is a mystery, we do know that in keeping with his daughter's wishes, Spotted Tail brought her to Fort Laramie for burial. Colonel Henry Maynadier provided a military escort for the burial party and arranged to have a scaffold erected on the high ground overlooking the fort to the north. Maynadier issued orders to provide full military honors to the girl. After the tumultuous events of 1876, Spotted Tail retrieved his daughter's bones and took them to the reservation for reburial.

Red Cloud - (Mahpialuta) - Chief of the Oglala Sioux. Red Cloud was one of the most influential of the Sioux leaders. Red Cloud consolidated his leadership of the Oglala and was considered their principle leader by 1865. He was a frequent visitor to the Fort Laramie area. From 1866-1868 he led the Sioux in opposing white encroachment into the Powder River country. "Red Cloud's War," as it became known, proved to be very costly to the U.S. Army and white emigrants on the Bozeman Trail. Red Cloud won the war by forcing the government to abandon the Bozeman Trail forts and negotiate a treaty - the only such victory the Sioux could claim throughout the Indian Wars period. Thinking the whites would now keep their word, Red Cloud signed the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. He continued to be a champion of Indian rights and to oppose any further encroachment of Indian lands.

Crazy Horse - (Tashunka Witco) - Probably the greatest of the Sioux leaders and still considered to be a sacred personage among the Sioux. Although legend states that Crazy Horse never visited the "white man's" fort on the Laramie, he certainly passed through the area very near Fort Laramie. As a boy, in 1851, Crazy Horse witnessed the Grattan Fight eight miles east of Fort Laramie. He became a powerful military leader among his people, playing a decisive role in the Indian victories at the Fetterman Fight in 1866, The Battle of the Rosebud in 1876, and the Custer Fight in 1876. Crazy Horse was killed during an altercation at Fort Robinson on September 5, 1877, while being arrested by soldiers.

Colonel Henry Carrington - Commanding officer of the 18th U.S. Infantry. Carrington passed through Fort Laramie on June 13, 1866, with his troops, en route to the Powder River country to establish forts along the Bozeman Trail. Unfortunately peace negotiations were in progress at Fort Laramie during this time for the purpose of securing the right of travel on the trail. After learning of the soldier's mission, the peace council failed, and Red Cloud began his war. Colonel Carrington was in command of Fort Phil Kearny at the time of the Fetterman Fight. The serious losses incurred during the fight cost Carrington his command and forever tarnished his reputation.

Lieutenant Caspar Collins - Son of the Post Commander, William O. Collins, and officer of the 11th Ohio Volunteer Cavalry. Collins left detailed accounts of life at Fort Laramie during the Civil War period. Unfortunately for young Collins, he became most well-known in death. On July 25, 1865, Collins led a group of 25 soldiers out of Platte River Bridge Station to relieve a detachment of ten soldiers guarding a supply train that was approaching the station. Indians closed in on the soldiers; Collins's horse bolted and ran into the group of Sioux. Collins and four other soldiers were killed. Platte River Bridge Station was soon renamed Fort Caspar. The city of Casper, Wyoming now stands on the site.

Colonel Thomas Moonlight - Moonlight was probably the most incompetent of the long list of officers who commanded Fort Laramie. Of all the tragic blunders that Moonlight made, the hanging of Chiefs Two Face and Black Foot in 1865 was probably the most infamous. Two Face and Black Foot brought white captive Mrs. Eubank and her baby to Fort Laramie to turn them over to the Army. Mrs. Eubank had been taken captive during a raid by the Cheyenne on the Little Blue the preceding year. Apparently the chiefs had bought Mrs. Eubank's freedom to gain the favor of the whites. Instead, they received death. Despite protests from several individuals, Colonel Moonlight had the chiefs hung with chains and left their bodies hanging for months as an example to other chiefs. Of course Moonlight's action brought further hostilities to the area. Moonlight went on to become Territorial Governor of Colorado in 1887.

General William T. Sherman - Civil war hero and commanding general of the Army after the election of U.S. Grant to the presidency. Sherman's Indian policy shaped the role that the Army would play during the height of the Indian Wars. Sherman was at Fort Laramie as part of the 1867-1868 peace commission.

General Phillip Sheridan - Lieutenant General of the army, Commander of the Division of the Missouri, and also a well-known Civil War hero. Sheridan spent time at Fort Laramie during the uneasy summer of 1876, at times making it his base of operations. Sheridan eventually went on to become commanding general of the Army.

General George Crook - Commanding general of the Department of the Platte and one of the most effective of the Indian Wars generals. General Crook was at Fort Laramie on many occasions, particularly in 1876. Crook was well known for his use of mules in the field and for his "horse meat" or "mud march" in 1876. Crook's character as a hard campaigner who also understood the Plains Indians made him effective as a general. It was Crook who ordered the arrest and confinement of Crazy Horse in 1877. He later went on to direct a successful campaign against the Apaches in the southwest.

John "Portugee" Phillips - (Manuel Filipe Cardoso) - Phillips made the legendary ride from Fort Phil Kearney to Fort Laramie (December 21 to 25, 1866) to deliver messages to the commanding officer of the post following the Fetterman Fight. Much has been written of the ride to Fort Laramie, most of it myth. Phillips was hired to make the journey to Deer Creek Station along with Daniel Dixon for \$300.00 each. Phillips was given an additional message at Fort Reno to carry to Colonel Palmer at Fort Laramie. The ride took four days. Most accounts make no mention of Indians chasing Phillips and Dixon. There is also no contemporary documentation supporting the story that Phillip's horse died after he arrived at Fort Laramie.

Martha Jane Canary - (Calamity Jane) - Frequented the Fort Laramie area and was an employee of the famous Three Mile or "Hog" Ranch (a house of ill repute just outside Fort Laramie Military Reservation). Calamity Jane's exploits are legendary. On one occasion, Calamity Jane dressed as a male and joined the Jenny expedition of 1875, to the Black Hills. She disguised herself as one of the cavalry troopers escorting the expedition. When discovered, Colonel Dodge ordered her out of the column, but she hid amongst the cargo in one of the wagons and later turned up in the Black Hills. There she reportedly made herself so useful as a forager that she was permitted to stay with the column. In 1876, she was discovered masquerading as one of General Crook's mule skippers, placed under arrest, and sent packing back to Fort Laramie. Calamity probably would not have been discovered had it not been for the fact that "her language when addressing the animals was not up to the usual standards of vituperative eloquence."

Wild Bill Hickok - (James Butler Hickok) - Passed through Fort Laramie enroute to the Black Hills on the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage line. Wild Bill was famous as a gunfighter, lawman and gambler. Hickok was later murdered in a saloon in Deadwood by Jack McCall.

Mark Twain - (Samuel Clemens) - Unfortunately for history, Mark Twain passed through Fort Laramie in the summer of 1861, during the night on the stagecoach. Undoubtedly, had he passed through in the daylight hours he would have left a vivid written picture of life at the Fort.

Wyatt Earp - Earp was a noted gunfighter and lawman (sometimes concurrently.) Earp took part in the famous "Gunfight at the OK Corral." He passed through Fort Laramie in 1877, as a special shotgun messenger for a gold shipment on the Cheyenne-Deadwood Stage.

Buffalo Bill Cody - (William F. Cody) - Cody passed through Fort Laramie in 1876, while en route north with the Fifth Cavalry. Cody was a well known frontiersman, Pony Express rider, buffalo hunter, scout, and showman. Shortly after passing through Fort Laramie, Cody had his famous duel with Yellow Hair at the War Bonnet Creek Fight on July 17th, 1876. Cody took Yellow Hair's scalp - an event widely touted as "the first scalp for Custer."