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# A Farm Boy's Memory of the Cavalry

John McCormally

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FORT RILEY, KANSAS  
A CAVALRY TROOP HEADING BACK TO CAMP  
AFTER A DAY IN THE FIELD

Jack Delano  
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## *A Farm Boy's Memory of the Cavalry*

“They’re ghost riders now, those Fort Riley Cavalrymen.” So wrote John McCormally in the *Salina Journal*, reprinted in the *Daily Union Centennial Edition*, June 24, 1953.

Men were men who could ride, and it was the farmer with a herd of brood mares and a remount stallion, rather than the General Motors tank division, that provided the soldier his transportation.

Except for the patriotic twinges we’re all supposed to have, I’m afraid I lost interest in the army about the time it sold its horses.

My attachment before that was the result of living on a farm less than half a day’s jog, at a marching trot, from Fort Riley, which, arguments of other forts notwithstanding, every Kansan knows was the home of the US Cavalry.

Custer was there and Sheridan and Comanche, who was Custer’s horse, which legend says was the only survivor

of the Little Big Horn. He was returned to Fort Riley where he received honored care until he died November 6, 1891.

His skin was mounted and stuffed and is in the University of Kansas National History Museum.

It was enough - at least in those days before space cadets and TV cowboys - to win a boy’s heart. I went through

the cowboy and railroad engineer periods, but the bug bite didn’t take. I had nothing but scorn for friends who wasted their time making model airplanes. I defied what signs there were already of progress. I knew that when

I grew up I would be a cavalryman.

I can’t remember when I made my first visit to Fort Riley. That part isn’t



FORT RILEY, KANSAS  
 WATERING THE HORSES DURING A  
 FIELD PROBLEM OF THE CAVALRY  
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important because the fort, on regular occasions, would come to me.

No modern boy, craning his neck to watch the vapor trails of jets streaking the sky, can possibly feel as we did when we spotted the dust clouds on a summer evening which announced the cavalry was coming.

The hoe in the cornfield suddenly stopped. We'd race to the house, shouting with excitement, pointing to the distant cloud.

My mother would come to the kitchen door, wiping her hands on her

apron, and step out on the back porch to watch with us.

The cloud would float above the road for what seemed like hours, before we could distinguish the first horse. When they were a mile away, we could hear the music of creaking leather and the clop of hoofs and the hearty, singing commands that floated like the dust across the wheat fields.

The lines of brown horses always seemed endless. They had the striking sameness that I would recognize years later in marching men that comes from the monotony of

training as well as from selection. They always came at a steady, tireless trot, the troopers moving rhythmically up and down as they posted in their saddles.

We always were a little unbelieving when we watched the riders, their guidons fluttering, turn down the lane to our house and move past the yard in sweaty files of two. A colonel or major or whoever was in charge would swing down and touch the wide brim of his hat with his quirt and talk to my father.

Of course there had always been previous arrangements. We got this honor because our farm boasted an unusually accessible sand bar where the mounts could be watered in the river; and because my father had friends at the fort who were agreeable to him selling some hay.

Those nights we'd have to be drug to our chores. We always stood a little way off, not quite at ease in the presence of the weather beaten troopers with their high, laced boots and shining spurs. We watched them pull off the funny looking saddles with the slit down the seat, and caught that odor of wet

leather and foamy horsehair which, even in a world of hot rubber and gasoline exhaust, you never forget.

The horses would be watered belly deep in the river, staked out with oats-filled nose bags on, and then groomed and dried. Tents would spring up, bedrolls were spread, and little fires flickered.

I'd like to remember that we sat around the campfires in the evening and listened to tall tales from the troopers and heard the singing of war ballads. But we didn't. We did our chores and ate our supper and went to bed. I don't recall that they were singing soldiers anyway. And they didn't talk much. That was the peacetime army, mostly reviled, certainly neglected. It didn't become popular to be a soldier, or even associate with one, until a decade or so later.

By that time, of course, the cavalry was gone, with only poor, old stuffed Comanche to recall the glorious days. And, of course, I never became a cavalryman.

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*John McCormally, Salina Journal, reprinted in the Daily Union Centennial Edition, June 24, 1953.*