

Clean Living on 'Soap Suds Row'

BY MARTHA DEERINGER

More than two centuries ago, dusty soldiers stationed across the state, from Fort Gates in Central Texas to Fort Davis in far West Texas, desperately needed clean uniforms. Few soldiers wanted to tackle the dirty work themselves, so laundresses—a historically obscure but crucial component of the frontier military—were officially put to work by the U.S. Army in 1802 in a practice adopted from the British.

Laundresses, also referred to as washerwomen, were the only women officially recognized and supported by the Army in the 19th century. Yet officers' wives and daughters, who technically were merely camp followers, considered themselves on a higher social plane than the lowly laundresses.

Still, social pariahs or not, the laundresses washed and mended the Army's clothing, nursed the sick, baked pies, cleaned houses and generally lent an air of civilization to the frontier.

A laundress was required to have a certificate of good character from headquarters before she could assume duty. Laundresses for each company were appointed by company captains and received one daily ration of meat, bread and whiskey. The whiskey was issued for removing stains—but may or may not have been used for that purpose. The washerwomen were permitted to seek the services of the company surgeon and were also allotted a tent, a hatchet, a large tub for washing and two mess pans.

"Soap Suds Row," where the laundresses lived and worked, was separate from the rest of the camp, often behind the barracks near the sewer outlet. At Ringgold Barracks, on the Rio Grande, the laundresses lived in tattered tents draped over frame supports and patched with barrel staves, broken boards and gunnysacks. If a laundress married a soldier, a frequent occurrence because women were scarce at frontier forts, her husband lived on Soap Suds Row with her.

Doing soldiers' laundry was astonishingly hard work. Before dawn, the laundress chopped wood and hauled water, often heating as much as 50 gallons in various tubs for soaking, scrubbing and rinsing. Typically, clothes were soaked for a day or two before washing and then tossed into a tub of steaming water along with lye soap shaved from bars the laundress made from wood ashes and animal fat.

Bending over the tub with a scrub board, she would rub the garments across the surface, applying more soap when needed, until they were reasonably clean. After a rinse, the clothes were boiled to finish off the last of the vermin (lice, fleas and ticks) before they were wrung out and spread on the grass or hung in trees to dry. Boiling could shrink the heavy woolen uniforms, so the Army issued them several sizes too big.

A few military men with high sartorial standards paid extra to have their uniforms ironed, a backbreaking task involving a heavy flatiron heated in a skillet over the fire to avoid ash and smoke stains. Laundresses also did mending, sewed on buttons and applied bluing to the final rinse to offset the yellowish tinge that light-colored clothing acquired from repeated washings with lye soap.

Each soldier paid the laundress according to a schedule determined by each company's post council. At Fort Concho in San Angelo, the amount ranged from \$1 to \$4 a month per soldier, depending on the soldier's rank. Money owed to laundresses was subtracted from a soldier's pay. While a soldier might earn \$13 a month, an industrious laundress could make up to \$40 over the same period.

Because many Army laundresses could neither read nor write, having spent their lives far removed from educational opportunity, there are few diaries, letters or journals recording their experiences. Some laundresses were infamous characters, roundly criticized for drunkenness and loose morals. At Fort Concho, a laundress refused to leave the post hospital after she was fired by Dr. W.F. Buchanan for "theft, disqualification to tell the truth, and general impudence." Soldiers removed her from the hospital area.

During the seven-plus decades that laundresses were employed by the Army (their authorization was officially rescinded in 1878), the majority of these oft-maligned women proved honest, chaste, industrious and kindhearted. But the Army, leaning toward abolition of the laundress positions to save money, asked commanding officers for their opinions.

"Of course these women cost money—most women do!" insisted Gen. Irwin McDowell. "But I think it will be found that they, like the generality of their sex, are worth all they cost."

