



FORT TEJON AS IT MAY HAVE APPEARED IN 1855

*This conception of the appearance of Fort Tejon has been drawn by Author
Clarence Cullimore and is based upon his research into the
records of the historic landmark*



—Photo from Clarence Cullimore Collection

BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND STAGE ROUTE NEAR FORT TEJON

This photograph, a copy of an original taken in 1890, shows the old road that served Fort Tejon and which later became a part of Golden State Highway No. 99

Fort Tejon's Centennial

By Clarence Cullimore



URING THE PAST FORTY YEARS I have been preparing for this occasion, and consequently have, in a sense, come to love every adobe block of Fort Tejon, each unmortared rock of foundation, and the forthright roof-trusses pinned together with wooden pegs that speak eloquently of the superior quality of the art of carpentry as it was practiced in the fall of 1854 in the days of the Fort's construction. These ruins are fascinating, but not more intriguing than the stories that have come down to us about the Fort in its heyday.

If you will now permit me to spin the crystal ball counter-clockwise, so that you may peer with me into the past, we will take a look at the sutler's store that, a century ago, stood on the upper side of the present Highway 99. From its porch, as we stand there on that day long past, we have a fine view of the Fort's parade ground, the adobe buildings that surround it, and the Peter Lebeck Oak at the right, obstructing a part of the Hospital and Commissary building.

It is now three o'clock in the afternoon, the off-duty period. At daybreak this morning, Reveille sounded as usual — Stable call ten minutes later. At 5:30 there was policing of quarters, and there had been breakfast at 6:00. Boots and Saddles for mounted drill summoned at 6:30, and Call to Quarters at 8:00, Howitzer Drill from 10:00 to 11:00 and dinner at 12:30 — and now the off-duty period until 4:00 p.m. Then there would be dismounted drill until 5:30 — feed and clean horses at 6:00 — Retreat at sunset — supper immediately after — Tattoo at 9:00 and Lights Out at 10:00. That was the day's work at Old Fort Tejon.

Turning, on the porch of the sutler's store, we push open one leaf of the double door and look inside to see a group of blue-clad Dragoons, some seated and others standing around a pot-bellied iron stove. Their attire is striking, verging on a style that might almost be French. In deep blue frock-coats, buttoned tightly across the chest

with nine gilded buttons, these soldiers compel attention. Orange-colored cloth trims the stiff-standing collar and cuffs. The sky-blue trousers are loose, to permit tucking into boots. But that hat! That puts on the finishing touch — makes the Dagroons the show troops of the whole United States Army, with its leather chin-strap holding it at a jaunty angle, as the orange pompon quivers at its front and center.

Kasper Cohn, manager of the store, strokes the handle-bars of his drooping moustache. He has just put a chunk of oak-wood on the stove's waning coals, and banged shut the door. Lieutenant Castor is the center of interest, as he recounts incidents of his recent bear-hunt in the canyon above the Fort. And Lieutenant Castor is a soldier to be listened to. He is a native of Pennsylvania and a graduate of West Point. He was in charge of the first contingent of Dragoons to occupy the Fort. Hunting with two other young officers, he bagged a five-hundred-pound grizzly bear, thereby replenishing the protein content of the larder of Company "A." But the tidbit, the most delicate morsel of all the bear's anatomy, declares the Lieutenant, was revealed only when the outer skin of the bear's paws was peeled away and the barbecued delicacy exposed. There will never be a viand to excel barbecued bear paws.

Newmark, part-owner in the store, clenches his pipe-stem between his teeth, and with thumb underneath its bowl with a face moulded on its porcelain front, presses down the tobacco with his forefinger. Now he removes the pipe from his lips. "Speaking of bears," he says, "Williamson of the Railroad Survey, when he came this way before the Fort was started, wrote that the place was infested with grizzly bears. Acorns, he said, were what attracted them. And there's that inscription carved on that oak seventeen years ago: 'Peter Lebeck, killed by a bear in 1837'. I'd like to know who this Lebeck fellow was. His name sounds sort of Frenchy, but Corporal O'Shannecy insists that Lebeck was Irish — that his complete name was Patrick, Peter, Lee, Beck." Newmark laughed. "O'Shannecy sees that no one gets ahead of the Irish."

And now I will give the crystal ball another spin. A martial strain strikes our ears, and the cymbals crash. We see the glitter of brass horns on a moving field of blue. It is the full complement of

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Fort Tejon's military band marching across the parade ground. It is their last rehearsal before the program that they are to present on the 4th of July for the cultural advancement of the dwellers in the Village of the Angels.

And now that our vision is focused on Los Angeles, we see a posse of armed Dragoons from Fort Tejon answering a call for help emanating from the Safety Council of the Los Angeles villagers, who have requested aid from the Fort's garrison in searching-out Southland outlaws.

And while we still look southward, we see the Episcopal Bishop Kip with a few companions climb into a wagon and leave Los Angeles in this conveyance drawn by powerful mules. The party is heavily armed as they toil towards the Fort, for the way is known to be infested with bandits. Two days later, in the barracks building, that stands today restored, Bishop Kip holds Sunday services and baptizes the children of two officers of the Fort. The same morning he read the funeral service for a soldier who had died at the Fort.

And now we hear the thud, thud, thud of strange hoof-beats. The camels! The camels are coming! We recall that in 1853 Jefferson Davis, Secretary of War, came intimately in contact with the troubles of military transportation in the arid sections of the Southwest and resolved to give the camels an opportunity to lessen the difficulties. It was partly through Davis' efforts that the first and only United States Army Camel Corps was established. About thirty camels arrived from their sandy haunts to disembark at Indianola, Texas. Lieutenant Beale was employed to open a wagon road from Fort Defiance, New Mexico, to the frontiers of California, and a part of the herd of camels was put at his disposal for this expedition. The journey occupied forty-eight days through an unexplored wilderness of forest and plain and desert. Beale spoke in the most enthusiastic terms of the work performed by the camels on this difficult trek. On the desert they carried water for the mules; traversed stretches of country covered with the sharpest volcanic rock without injury to their feet, climbed with heavy packs over mountains where the unloaded mules found it hard to go, even with the assistance of the dismounted riders; and to the surprise of all the party plunged into rivers without hesitation and swam them with ease. Lieutenant

Beale concluded that he would rather have one camel for such work than four of his best mules.

A Los Angeles news item in the weekly paper has this to say of the Camel Corps: "The dromedaries arrived by way of the Mojave. They created a great curiosity, and scared all the horses and mules and children. When the docility of the animals was proved to the wonder-stricken senses of the natives, they were all anxious to take a ride on the humps of those awkward locomotives, and as long as they remained in town, throngs of boys and men followed their motions. They remained but two days, however, and went to join the remainder of the train which had followed up the east side of the mountains to Tejon."

Again let us spin the ball and behold the peaceful Fort on a crisp February morning in 1857. We are jolted by a sharp and awe-filled convulsion of the earth's surface, shaken by an earthquake of no mean proportion. Violently it wrenches at the Fort buildings as if to tear the roofs from their moorings, as if to pull brick from adobe brick. The Dragoons rush outside and see chimneys and some walls fall. The earth of the parade ground opens in a crack and closes. The gray dust of devastation rises. The barracks buildings and the hospital building withstood the earthquake with minor damage, but there was much loss to some of the other structures. The Dragoons are permitted to sleep their nights in the open while minor quakes are continuing, but the repair work on the Fort is soon under way. This is in the year 1857.

Spinning the ball again, we hear the screech of brakes and the Butterfield Overland Mail coach drawn by six steaming horses careens to the alighting block cut from an oak stump in front of the sutler's store. The stage disgorges its passengers, who stretch in relief and shake pulverized scenery from their linen dusters. This is the first lap of their journey from San Francisco through Visalia to Fort Tejon, and then they will go down to Los Angeles and on, on, on to St. Louis. They have hopes of breaking the record to the Missouri metropolis, the record of twenty-three days and nine hours.

For ten years after its inception the colorful Dragoons occupied Fort Tejon, but it was abandoned on the morning of September 11, 1864, and soon became a part of the extensive Tejon Rancho. This

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rancho was originally a Mexican grant and was later purchased by Edward Fitzgerald Beale. His purchase included miles of mountain country, thousands of acres now in lush agricultural development, and vast fields, at present producing petroleum products. It is said that Beale purchased this property for a sum approximating five cents an acre.

In the 1870's the Fort's condition was already pathetic. The buildings were going to decay. The parade ground was a sheep corral, and the officers' quarters were sheep-herders' houses. The disintegration of the Fort continued in varying degrees.

And now let me recall the first time I saw the Fort. It was in the winter of 1914 when Dwight Griffith (recent Bakersfield High School football mentor) and I were returning from a trip to Los Angeles in our Model T Ford with flapping side curtains. It began to snow. We were soon in a snow flurry, almost a blizzard, but could still follow the tracks of a wagon that preceded us. Now the tracks turned into a private road. We followed until we practically bumped into the old Barracks Building. Hurrying inside out of the storm we were surprised to find that the place was pretty well occupied by horses and cattle who had come there for a purpose similar to ours. There was plaster on the ceiling then, except in spots, and the window sash and some doors were intact, but the wooden floors of the main barracks room had been removed to furnish lumber for other ranch structures, much in the same manner as the hospital building had been taken down brick by brick to be transported to the Tejon Ranch headquarters fifteen miles away, there to be incorporated in other ranch buildings.

Early in January, 1940, the State of California acquired title to five acres of the Fort site for a State park. The property included the site of only part of the original Fort property, and did not take in the Lebec Oak or the foundations of the Hospital Building or several lesser structures.

A plan is now under way to acquire additional acreage to include the entire site of the original Fort, and the Fort burial ground several hundred yards beyond the parade ground. It appears that this acquisition and a partial restoration will provide an opportunity to serve a great number of people by helping them gain an insight

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into the historic background of the Fort. It suggests the living-museum idea as a powerful dramatic and educational factor in picturing the development of California.

But this occasion, the one-hundredth anniversary of the occupancy of Federal Fort Tejon, is more than a centennial celebration centering on a group of adobe buildings stemming from the earth under foot and laid up, brick upon adobe brick, in mud mortar by the hands of Indians who lived hereabouts. It is more than a belated tribute paid to the memory of Edward Beale who petitioned Congress to appropriate funds to establish, among these oaks, hemmed in by these glorious hills, a fort that should have as a part of its purpose the protection of Indians who were rapidly headed for extermination, and who through proper consideration might be taught the arts and crafts of civilized life. Our meeting here has roots that extend beyond the confines of the Fort of the boundaries of this county or the State of California. We are gathered here today to pay tribute to the Dragoons who manned this Fort, but in a broader sense we honor every member of the United States Army who took part in the development of our great West.

California, through its Division of Beaches and Parks, has not forgotten. The State of California is going to restore, in part, Old Fort Tejon, to make of it a place of interest and a source of patriotic inspiration for hundreds of thousands of travelers who will draw into this quiet dell to contemplate this little bit of California in the 1850's.

