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BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT      COOKE'S PEAK — PASARON POR AQUI      A FOCUS  
ON UNITED STATES HISTORY IN      SOUTHWESTERN NEW MEXICO      Donald Howard  
Couchman      CULTURAL RESOURCES NO. 7, 1990      BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
NEW MEXICO STATE OFFICE      SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

Excerpt: Fort Cummings, 1880

Commander: Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Augustus Monroe Dudley

During this period (during 1880), robberies by road agents were also occurring. The soldiers camped at Fort Cummings could not prevent two mail robberies that took place in the vicinity of the old Good sight station. The buckboard mail from Silver City was held up, but fortunately little of value was obtained by the bandits. However, robberies by road agents soon would be the least of the transportation companies' and the soldiers' problems. By December 1879, Victorio was headed north again. Various military units along the border in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas girded to meet the new threat, and if possible, put an end to it. In January 1880 General Hatch ordered the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry Regiments, including Major Anson Mills, into the field at Fort Cummings and other posts. By mid-summer companies of the Fourth and Ninth Cavalry and Fifteenth Infantry, numbering several hundred men, were living in tents outside the old walled Fort Cummings.

Hatch's troops located Victorio's camp at the head of the Palomas River in the Black Range, and, led by chief of Scouts Captain Henry K. Parker, Cavalry troops and Indian scouts successfully surrounded the Apaches and attacked on May 24, 1880. Various estimates claimed from 10 to 55 hostiles killed, including women and children. The truth, similar to Parker's report of 30 dead, was probably in between the two figures. The survivors fled for the hills and Mexico in at least three separate groups.

From the newspaper reports it appeared that not all of the Apaches joined the flight for the border. Perhaps to either distract the military or for just plain viciousness, some struck at civilians, especially the teamsters. Fighting at Cooke's Canyon reached its peak on June 5, 1880. According to Apache oral history, a small party led by Blanco attempted to break through the cordon along the road while Nana created a diversion toward the Floridas. Even though the canyon was not "full of Apaches" as the telegrapher at Fort Cummings communicated, for Samuel Lyons, a man named Vigil, and three others, it might as well have been. Although three Indians were killed, including Blanco and Victorio's son. When the troopers penetrated farther into the canyon, the burned bodies of Lyons and the four others were found.

Fort Cummings had been established on a slightly elevated area between two wide flat arroyos. By mid-1880 the military reservation looked like a field of mushrooms, because many tents had been erected to house the command assembled to help corral Victorio. With the large military encampment at Fort Cummings, A. S. Lyons and his wife Mary were relatively safe in taking over Sam Lyons' operation there. Lyons was also appointed postmaster on August 3, 1880.

In later days Victorio would try a couple more forays north of the border, but he did not seriously threaten the area around Fort Cummings. However, a few miles in any direction, the story was

different. Soldiers on patrol had several brushes with small bands of Apaches, and in early September, the mail coach was attacked near the old Goodsight station. The driver, Alee Lebeau, and passengers, Issac Roberts and Henry S. Madden, were killed and the mail destroyed. Four days later Indians pursued another coach near Goodsight, but the coach escaped harm when the driver encountered a railroad survey party with an escort. That evening the Apaches tried to stop a third coach from the National Mail and Transportation Company, and pursued it to within three miles of Fort Cummings.

On September 7, 1880, Apaches surprised First Lieutenant James Parker and a detachment of the Fourth Cavalry near the Floridas. Parker's command suffered casualties of one killed and three wounded. He was forced to retreat to a more defensible position and send for help. Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Augustus Monroe Dudley and a company of Ninth Cavalry from Fort Selden dashed to their rescue, covering the 16 miles at an average of 10 miles per hour, an exceptionally grueling experience for the mounts. Later, Dudley severely criticized Parker for his actions in the fight and recommended a thorough investigation.

In late September and early October, United States soldiers again pursued Victorio to the border. This time they chased him far below the border, but they would not be the ones to claim his scalp. Victorio retreated from the pursuing United States troops into the waiting arms of Captain Joaquin Terrazas, and at Tres Castillos, Victorio's band was surrounded and nearly annihilated. On October 15, 1880, the Mexicans rushed the Apaches, who had nearly exhausted their ammunition, and 78 Indians were killed, including Victorio, and nearly as many women and children were taken captive. Nana escaped with a small contingent that had been lagging behind on the trek.

Between the news of Victorio's defeat and death and the news that Fort Cummings was to be honored by a Presidential visit, Lieutenant Colonel Dudley took command of the fort. President Rutherford Birchard Hayes and his wife were traveling east from California by rail, and they had to travel by stage between the eastward-progressing Southern Pacific Railway Company line and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad advancing south along the Rio Grande.

The Presidential party and escort did not spend much time at Fort Cummings. They arrived at seven on the evening of October 25 and departed at half-past seven the next morning. Since the command was housed in tents, Hayes and his wife probably roomed at Lyons' hostelry.

The President received no serenade by the Fifteenth Infantry, because three members of the band were in the guardhouse. Whatever his duties entailed with the Presidential party, Commanding General William Tecumseh Sherman visited some of the post facilities. At the hospital he found Michael R. Conlon, a prisoner charged with desertion. When Conlon's Company D of the Fifteenth Infantry had been transferred to Fort Cummings from Fort Wingate, he was on a spree in a nearby Mexican town and was left behind. Since he was an old-time soldier, working on his fourth enlistment, Sherman listened to his story and asked Dudley to investigate the matter. It was not surprising that Dudley recommended the charges against the man be dropped and then paroled Conlon without waiting for an answer.

Dudley was willing to cooperate with the army's Commanding General, but at lower levels he complained strenuously. According to Dudley the post had insufficient transportation; the horses and mules were all broken down, as were the wagons; there were no supplies, money, or clothing;

the funds furnished did not meet one-quarter of the demands; and, above all, that the post was unhealthy and should be abandoned immediately.

Dudley further stipulated that if the troops had to remain at Fort Cummings, a great deal of construction, especially stables, had to be accomplished soon. He underscored this issue by pointing out that he did not have enough lumber to build a coffin to bury a soldier who had been killed on November 2. Dudley's complaints were not reserved solely for the military hierarchy. The adobe house, and ancillary structures, built by Jones on the Fort Cummings reservation, irritated Dudley as it had some of his predecessors. After taking over from his deceased relative, A. S. Lyons constructed new buildings, at least according to Dudley, and further provoked the post commander by running a herd of about 200 cattle on the reservation. Lyons was also operating two gambling tables before Dudley ordered him to desist. There must have been other nefarious individuals hanging around the post, because a recommendation was forwarded through military channels to enlarge the Fort Cummings military reservation to keep off improper characters, including horse thieves and other desperadoes. Secretary of War Alexander Ramsey agreed and on November 9, 1880, President Hayes signed the order to increase the designated area by a factor of nine. The new perimeter was to be six miles on each side, still centered on the flagpole.

As a precaution against surprise, and to give the many troopers still stationed in the field at Fort Cummings something to occupy their time, Dudley sent out frequent patrols. Despite persistent rumors that bands of Indians were seen in various parts of the region, his patrols continued to come up empty handed. In fact, they reported no Indian sign more recent than at least a month. Actually, he and his quartermaster department were probably more concerned about procuring 57 stoves, most of Henry Hopkins Sibley's design, so that he and the men could keep warm in the approaching winter.

The remainder of the year was uneventful for the military command at Fort Cummings. Only rumors of Indians surfaced, and various detachments were sent to guard railroad construction crews progressing from the Rio Grande toward the fort and to patrol for Apaches.

Earl S. Hall recalled in later years that he had been on a 15-day expedition scouting for Indians and when the men returned to Fort Cummings, they found that they had lost an average of 15 pounds each, or a pound a day per man.

It was during this interlude that a peculiar request prompted Dudley to seek advice from Washington regarding enlistment criteria. An unidentified White man had applied for enlistment in Company M of the Black Ninth Cavalry. Dudley wanted to know if, in light of the Fifteenth Amendment, this could be permitted. As a further argument he pointed out that Chinese soldiers had been enlisted and were serving in the district. He neither identified the units that the Oriental soldiers were in nor was there any indication of the outcome of the enlistment application.

In late November and early December, an outbreak of theft and other skulduggery occurred near Fort Cummings. George Stevens, returning to Silver City from the Rio Grande, was held up five miles east of Mason's Ranch. Bandits took his rifle, ammunition, and money but left him his loaded revolver in case he ran into Indians. Horse thieves also hit Mason's and other nearby ranches. Dudley and the Silver City newspaper editor speculated that this was either the work of a gang of road agents or itinerant tramps waiting to help lay the track for the railroad rather than the work of Indians.

Both railroads continued to build toward the vicinity of Cooke's Peak. On December 11, 1880, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe crews constructing the road grade, preparatory to laying the track, reached a point five miles directly south of Fort Cummings.

This route had been recommended in May by railroad Chief Engineer A. A. Robinson. Previously, his survey crews had examined four routes to traverse the land between the town of Colorado, on the Rio Grande, and the Mimbres River. The crews had examined Florida Pass, south of Fort Cummings; Mule Springs Pass, probably the same pass that Bell's party named Palmer's Pass in 1867; Cooke's Canyon; and another gap Robinson referred to as Lyons' Pass. The road was being built through the ten mile wide flat of Florida Pass.

Meanwhile, the Southern Pacific Railroad Company was making progress east from California. It had stalled temporarily at the Colorado River until a bridge could be completed and permission secured to build across the Fort Yuma military reservation. On March 17, 1880, the line reached Tucson, its crews having constructed the longest straight stretch of track (47 miles) and longest continuous curve (5 miles) in railroad history. In its wake, railroad construction left new water wells and the embryo of a town every 60 or 70 miles, the distance a steam locomotive could traverse without having its water tank refilled.

The official date for the railroad arriving at present-day Deming of December 15, 1880, may not be entirely accurate. Lieutenant Colonel Dudley indicated that "regular trains commenced running on the Southern Pacific Railroad yesterday [December 12] connecting with the stage line at a point about twelve miles south of this camp."

The new terminus of the Southern Pacific was called Domingo by the Silver City newspaper editor, but the name soon was changed to Deming. The new name honored Mary Ann Deming Crocker, wife of Charles Crocker. He and Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Collis P. Huntington comprised "the big four" of western railroading.

As it progressed east, the railroad made a significant impact on existing businesses. The stage lines in California and Arizona curtailed their routes at the rail terminus, and, in most cases, finally went out of business altogether. The same was true for many of the freighting outfits. As these transportation entrepreneurs were threatened, so were the establishments that catered to their or their passengers' trade.

For Lyons at Cooke's Spring, the railroad's progress was a double threat. First, it would soon be joined by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and in a few months the railroads would replace many of the stage lines that supported his operation. Second, the wells sunk at Deming to supply the steam locomotives with water had hit an abundant supply at only 50 feet. Now emigrants, cattle herds, and others no longer had to depend on the water at Cooke's Spring.

Lyons fought back the best he could. He placed an advertisement in local papers reminding the public that he still continued to operate the trader's store at old Fort Cummings and had a large stock of groceries, liquors, and general merchandise at Silver City prices. Had it not been for the continued military presence at Fort Cummings, however, Lyons would soon have been out of business. This is true also for others who furnished the command with hay, beef, wood, and other contract items.

On January 14, 1881, an Apache raiding party numbering between 40 and 50 struck near Fort Cummings killing several people and placing the post in a state of turmoil for several days. Two peddlers, Omero Jackson and another man, were on their way from the Rio Grande to

Silver City with a wagonload of fish when the Indians intercepted them near the old Goodsight stage station. The Apaches killed both men and then waited nearly two hours to ambush the westbound stage at approximately the same spot. The Apaches shot driver James Sweeny from the box and then chased the stage for three-fourths of a mile, finally stopping it by killing one of the lead mules. Passenger Thomas White soon joined Sweeny and the others in death.

The eastbound stage driver who left Fort Cummings on the morning of January 14 found the carnage on the road and had returned to notify the soldiers.

Dudley left immediately for the scene with a large cavalry force. The bodies of the stage driver and passenger were still warm when the Ninth Cavalry troopers arrived. Dudley dispatched two companies (C and F) led by First Lieutenant Ballard Smith Humphrey and Second Lieutenant Charles William Taylor to pursue the Apaches. To guard against a repeat of the attack, he stationed a detachment of 17 men in the nearby pass. He also authorized the loan of arms to the railroad construction camps in case the Indians attacked them.

The Indians were not the only ones giving Dudley a problem, however. Concurrently he was having difficulties with the employees of the stage line. He wrote O. R. Smith, the National Mail and Transportation Company agent at Silver City, to send a responsible individual to Fort Cummings immediately. Three of the company's men had been issuing simultaneous orders that nearly caused a fight. In addition, some employees had been found drunk on the military reservation.

Dudley and his superiors also continued to have trouble with the newspapers in the area. The editor of the Silver City newspaper raged against the unanswered depredations and vilified General Edward Hatch for lying to the public about the tenuous state of affairs.

The editor's umbrage against the recurring Indian outrages and Hatch's actions (or lack thereof) continued into the middle of the summer of 1881.