The New Buffalo Soldiers, from Shadow Hills, California, reenactment at Fort Craig’s 150th Anniversary commemoration, 2004.
The transition from Spanish to Mexican rule in 1821 didn't bring many changes. When U.S. General Stephen Watts Kearney invaded in 1846 with his Army of the West, he promised that the U.S. would put an end to Indian raids. The U.S. established a network of forts in the new U.S. Territory of New Mexico, including a garrison at Socorro in 1849. The Socorro Garrison was replaced by Fort Conrad in 1851 and ultimately Fort Craig in 1854.

On February 21, 1862, the Blue and the Gray clashed at Valverde Crossing, with both sides taking heavy casualties. At the end of the day, the Confederates held the field of battle, the Union still held Fort Craig, and the New Mexico Volunteers under Col. Miguel Pino found the Confederates' supply wagons and burned them. What remained of Confederate supplies were lost at the Battle of Glorieta (east of Santa Fe) on March 28th, forcing them to retreat to Texas and ending the Confederate push for military conquest of the West.

Lozen, the great Warm Springs Apache woman warrior, is not as well known as the male warriors; but to the Apache she is possibly more revered. Her brother, Chief Victorio, said “Lozen is my right hand... strong as a man, brave as most, and cunning in strategy. Lozen is a shield to her people.” Her people relied on her supernatural powers to know the location of the white man’s hidden gold. Lozen and Dahteste, another woman warrior, helped negotiate the surrender of the wounded. Lozen and Dahteste survived the 27 years of captivity and lived out her remaining years at the Mescalero Reservation.

Fort Craig lies in south central New Mexico on the Rio Grande, with the rugged San Mateo Mountains to the west and a broad volcanic mesa punctuating the desolate Jornada del Muerto to the east.

Native Americans

The Piro made their home in this area of the Rio Grande Valley. They lived in scattered villages (pueblos), and grew corn, beans and squash on the floodplains. The Apache also lived here, though they preferred mountainous areas, and alternately traded with and raided the Piro settlements. The arrival of the Spanish marked the beginning of a way of life for both the Piro and the Apache. Although the Piro had a tense coexistence with the Spanish, mission churches were established including the San Miguel Mission at Pablito, present day Socorro. After the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, many of the Piro moved south to the El Paso, Texas area with the Spanish, probably against their will. Others scattered and joined other Pueblos, leaving the Apache in control of the region. The Spanish returned in 1692 but did not reestablish the central Rio Grande valley for a century.

El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, or The Royal Road of the Interior, was the lifeline that connected Mexico City with Chihuly Owingin, (just north of Santa Fe). After a week or more on a segment of the trail known as the Jornada del Muerto (Journey of Death), traveling without water and in constant fear of Apache raids, weary northbound caravans rested and watered their exhausted animals near Fort Craig. As travelers proceeded north, they funneled their livestock herds along a narrow passage between a prominent volcanic mesa and the Rio Grande just northeast of Fort Craig, here at MesadulConoto or “Counter’s Mesa,” an observer on the mesa top counted the livestock that survived the deadly journey as they were herded through the narrow passageway.

Fort Craig's new massive gravel bastions were “reinforced with Quaker Guns” (fake wooden cannons) and empty soldiers’ caps alongside real cannons and caps with real Union soldiers under them. This impressive show squelched any Confederate plans for a direct assault. After days of unsuccessfully trying to lure Union forces from their heavily protected fort, Confederates moved north in an attempt to maneuver around Fort Craig and cut off Union supplies. With the Confederates on the move, Canby started north to ensure Fort Craig was not left isolated and vulnerable.

The Army had spent the early years at Fort Craig conducting campaigns against Native Americans when a new threat appeared on the horizon. Confederates. By July of 1861, Fort Craig had become the largest fort in the Southwest with over 2,000 soldiers and growing. The same year, the First New Mexico Volunteer Infantry Regiment was formed. This largely Hispanic regiment served with courage and honor under the command of Colonel Kit Carson. In 1862, after capturing several military installations in southern New Mexico, General Henry Hopkins Sibley led an enthusiastic but poorly equipped brigade of about 2,500 Confederate troops up the Rio Grande to Fort Craig. Colonel R.S. Canby, the military governor of the New Mexico Territory, moved his troops from Santa Fe to Fort Craig with full knowledge of Sibley’s movements through information received from Paddy Graydon’s Spy Company and local New Mexicans.

Fort Craig circa 1865–1868: U.S. soldiers in front of the enlisted men's quarters.

The Civil War

Canby started north to ensure Fort Craig was not left isolated and vulnerable.

Life at Fort Craig - Information on life at the fort, both positive and negative, has come from post returns; family letters and official correspondence. Although the routines of military life could be tedious, and sometimes dangerous, Fort Craig was apparently not a bad duty station. By 1859, post returns indicate that many of the amenities of life, including newspapers, magazines, books and social events were available to the occupants of the fort.

After the Civil War African-American soldiers of the 9th Cavalry and the 30th and 125th Infantry served at Fort Craig in the segregated frontier army. The infantry units served from 1866 to 1889, and the cavalry units in 1876, 1877, 1880 and 1881, during the Apache Wars. The courage and dedication of these “Buffalo Soldiers” was such that General William Tecumseh Sherman was moved to remark “They are good troops; they make Soldiers” was such that General William Tecumseh Sherman was moved to remark "They are good troops; they make...