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Archaeologists complete study of Fort Meade range

By David Super Special to the Black Hills Pioneer
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John Trumpe surveys the target range at Fort Meade which was called a "Known Distance Range" in Army parlance. Soldiers fired their bolt-action rifles while standing, kneeling, sitting and from a prone position, each time moving farther back from the targets.

Courtesy photo

FORT MEADE — Mark by mark — 660 in all — a team of archaeologists has recorded every inscription on the stones that make up Fort Meade's old rifle range target wall.

The project, coordinated by the Bear Butte Creek Historic Preservation Council and funded by a grant from Deadwood Historic Preservation, is part of a multi-year effort to research and bring to life the stories of the Fort's target range, nearby Soap Suds Row and other Native American and natural features found within the 180-acre site located east of Sturgis along Highway 34-79, across from the Fort Meade Veterans Administration Medical Center.

The inscriptions were left over the course of three decades on the north side of the range wall, the earliest in 1922. Fort Meade troopers scratched, or in some cases, artistically carved marks in the limestone and sandstone blocks that make up the 500-foot masonry structure that was constructed in stages starting in the late 19th century.

The thick wall protected soldiers who worked the target frames while their fellow cavalymen sharpened shooting skills from set distances on the other side. Initials, names, dates, unit identifications, even a small, but fully carved silhouette of a man's face, comprise the "I was here," record of soldiers.

Most of the rifle marksmen were members of the 4th Cavalry Regiment, the post's longest-serving unit - 1927 until 1943 when the organization left for combat duty in the European Theater of World War II.

Tim Urbaniak, a retired University of Montana archaeology professor, led the team of six history experts who conducted a detailed, on-site inspection of the wall last September. They took 1,470 digital photographs of the inscriptions, made careful notes of their location and completed measured drawings of the protective wall plus an adjacent storage space and latrine.

Urbaniak recently submitted his formal report of the team's effort that adds to the council's growing understanding of the historic area. His research colleagues included field assistants James Busse, Garry Worthington, Robin Mutchler and Glen Fredlund; plus, Brenda Shierts, an archaeologist with the Belle Fourche BLM office; and Linea Sundstrom, a contract historian with extensive Black Hills historical research experience.

In early June of this year, a team of archaeologists and students from the University of South Dakota will visit the site to make a field survey of the nearby ground where local historians believe early Fort Meade maintained its "Soap Suds Row," a small neighborhood of tents and structures where civilian laundresses worked to wash the soldiers' uniforms.

Then, in early September, a second team of archaeologists will return to conduct a more extensive study to create a more accurate map of the laundry area and search for artifacts.

Support for these efforts will come from a second Deadwood Historic Preservation grant plus local volunteers.

"The financial support we have received from Deadwood Historic Preservation and other sources is critical to our success," said Bear Butte Creek Historic Preservation co-founder Ross Lamphere. "Our volunteers bring enthusiasm and energy. The grants permit us to engage skilled professional assistance in conducting the research."

Members of the Preservation Council have a long-range goal of turning the creekside area into an interpretive park that will more fully tell the story of pre-history, the centuries of influence by Native Americans, followed by the decades when Fort Meade was an active Army installation.

As an example of the group's efforts, a plan is being developed to involve high school history students from Sturgis and surrounding schools to more fully research the life stories of the 244 soldiers who left their names or other identifying information on the wall.

Several local entities make up the Council. Additional support has come from a Black Hills Area Community Foundation grant and individuals interested in the study of local history. The Council's board members and the organizations they represent include: Sturgis City Council - Kevin Forrester and Aaron Jordan; Meade County School District 46-1 - Pete Wilson; Black Hills Trails - Kevin Forrester; Sturgis Meade County Historical Society - Ross Lamphere (Council co-founder) and Mark Rambow; Meade County - Kevin Forrester; Fort Meade Museum - Mark Rambow; Fort Meade Veterans Administration - Justin Whitehead; Black Hills State University - Jace DeCory and Victoria (Rosie) Sprague; Citizen representative - Dr. Tom Hermann and South Dakota National Guard - Aaron Jordan.

Other non-voting partners include: Bureau of Land Management - Lori Kimball and Brenda Shierts; Council co-founder Mike Elliot; Linea Sundstrom, Logan Lamphere and David Super.

Goals of the project are the support of education about the natural and human history of the area and making it easier for visitors to experience its riches, Lamphere said.