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Major John Talbot

We are indebted to Ora L. Flaningam of Midland, Michigan, for bringing us up to date on one of the early pioneers from the days when Fort Kearny was active. Even though Fort Kearny was located in Kearney County it played a very important role in the early history of Buffalo County, and, for that matter, the whole western movement across this state, so we are always looking for information about those who settled there.

A query to the Ft. Kearny Genealogical Society some time ago from Mr. Flaningam requesting information about his great-grandmother, Mary Talbot, brought about this surprising "rest of the story."

The following account of John Talbot's life is based on U S census records; Buffalo County probate records; marriage records in the United States, Ireland and England; cemetery records; newspaper articles from Kearney, NE and Cheyenne, WY papers; local histories from Buffalo and Kearney counties in Nebraska and Cheyenne, Wyoming; and Civil War Pension records at the National Archives.

John Talbot was born at Honey Mount, Tipperary, Ireland, on August 8, 1832, the first child of John and Julie (Mears) Talbot. The Talbot family home was in a small "township" on the border of Offaly and Tipperary counties, part of the parish of Dunkerkrin. He married Mary Anne Josephine Wyse on February 12, 1854, at St. Wilfred's Chapel at Hulm in the district of Lancaster, England. Mary, the daughter of John and Mary (Forth) Wyse, had been born September 11, 1833 at Waterford, Ireland. At the time of their marriage John was a plasterer and Mary was a dressmaker. They apparently emigrated to the United States shortly after marrying. Some census records indicate they probably arrived during the summer of 1854.

When the Talbots arrived in New York John enlisted in the army at Governor's Island, possibly as a short cut to citizenship. As a private he served from September 1854 to September 1859 in Co K, 2nd Reg't, U S Dragoons. Pvt. Talbot was sent to Jefferson Barracks in Missouri, then to Fort Leavenworth, and then to Fort Kearny. He saw action in the Indian wars in western Nebraska and Wyoming and in Utah during the Mormon uprising.

Mary Talbot accompanied her husband as a laundress. This was a common practice because of the rule that enlisted men could not take their wives along on military assignments unless they had employment in the army. As a laundress she received higher pay than her husband did as a soldier.

When Pvt. Talbot's enlistment was up in September, 1859, he and his family remained in the Fort Kearny area. John built a 30' x 50' house of sun-dried brick on a site between the Military Reservation and Kearney City (more commonly known as Dobytown) It had wood floor, shingles and woodwork hewn from cedar logs freighted in from the Republican River valley. He opened a store in Kearney City, built in the same style as the house. It was a larger structure, however, "in order to provide room for the usual items of foods, clothing, and hardware, as well as a bakery, blacksmith shop, and in keeping with the times, a saloon. Pool and billiard tables were added to provide a bit of diversion for the soldiers at the fort and the travelers along the Oregon Trail."

Captain Eugene F Ware was an officer in the 7th Iowa Cavalry and served with the 1st Nebraska Cavalry in the Platte and Republican River valleys during the Indian wars of 1863-4.

In his writings about this experience he has included descriptions of Ft. Kearny and Dobytown in the fall of 1863. "Dobytown was a collection of adobe buildings of Mexican style, containing the toughest inhabitants of the country, male and female.

"Fort Kearny was at the Junction of the two regular roads, one coming west from Omaha, and the other up to the Platte from Fort Leavenworth, the trail being augmented by roads from Weston [Kansas] and St. Joe. These all united at Dobytown and went together in one track west. The volume of travel was much the larger on the southern prong, and these two great currents of overland commerce meeting at Dobytown fixed the spot there where the toughs of the country met and had their frolics. Large quantities of the meanest whisky on earth were consumed here, but, strange as it may appear, there were also quantities of champagne sold and drank here. Persons suddenly enriched, coming from the west and the mines, met here with old chums and cronies and with them drank champagne; or met old enemies, and with them fought a duel to the death. The cemetery was larger than the town. Three of the men of my company disappeared immediately upon their arrival, and it was suggested that I would find them in Dobytown. The next morning a man who lived in Dobytown being down at the Fort, offered to go up with me and go around, as he was acquainted with the places, and help me find the men. There was a row of telegraph poles between the Fort and Dobytown, and after we had started, this new acquaintance of mine, who had on two Colt's pistols, told me he could ride the line as fast as his horse would run, and put six bullets out of each revolver into successive telegraph poles; that is to say, he could hit a telegraph pole with every shot. Being somewhat experienced myself from a couple of years' service in the cavalry, I did not think he could do it, but I rode along with him, and he did it with the missing of only one telegraph pole in twelve shots. The road along was about eighteen feet from the poles. He afterwards told me he had practiced on it hundreds of times. I often practiced on it myself after that, but never could quite attain so good an average. His name was Talbot."

During this time of unrest among the Indians on the western frontier, John Talbot was probably one of the leaders in the formation of a local militia force in the Fort Kearny area. He did serve in the U. S. Army during the Civil War from Sept. 24, 1864 through July 27, 1866. He was a 1st Lieutenant in Co. "A" 1st Neb. Calvary. One record mentions that he was a brevet Major and he was referred to as "Major" for the rest of his life. Talbot ended his army career at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, and then the family returned to their home at Kearney City near Ft. Kearny.

John and Mary Anne Talbot had 11 children. Three daughters survived to adulthood. Lucy was born at Ft. Kearny on June 23, 1859. She married Charles L. DeLaBarre and had four children. Pauline Hortense was born August 10, 1865, at Kearney City. She married James Watson Wakeley and had eight children. The youngest daughter, Josephine, was born at Ft. Leavenworth, KS, on February 1, 1866, and married Charles Taylor.

Following John Talbot's second departure from the U S Army he began dividing his time between his family home at Kearney City - "Dobytown" - and Cheyenne, Wyoming, which later became his permanent home. As he made this transition from the one locality to the other, it appears from existing records that the year 1867 was a busy one. A local history of Cheyenne, Wyoming, describes his arriving in that city as one of the earliest settlers in 1867 even before the railroad was constructed through that city. He took a claim to 160 acres between Cheyenne and Fort Russell, later renamed Ft. Warren. By September he had opened the Talbot House on the

corner of 16th and Thomas Street, one of the earliest hotels in the city. In October he was supervising the construction of commercial properties in the business district.

However, he apparently spent part of the year 1867 in Nebraska because he was reported to be at home near Ft. Kearny recovering from a gunshot wound and that he was wounded again the following year. Both wounds were the result of accidents which occurred while hunting in the area of the fort. He may have also visited Chicago during that year. An affidavit in his war pension records declares that he obtained a divorce in Chicago in August, 1867 although no records of that divorce have yet been found.

By 1870 or 1877, depending on which source one uses, John Talbot had severed his ties with Nebraska and taken up permanent residence in Cheyenne. Although his wife and daughters remained here, he did not go to Cheyenne alone. He was accompanied by Elizabeth Knaggs. John and Elizabeth claimed they were married at Evans, Weld County, Colorado by Justice of the Peace, J. H. Pinkerton, on July 21, 1873. Later, when applying for a widow's pension, Elizabeth stated that the marriage records were destroyed by fire March 30, 1897. No records of that marriage have yet been found either.

Elizabeth Knaggs was the daughter of William and Ann Knaggs, also early settlers in the Fort Kearny area. They immigrated from London, England and came here in 1862 when Elizabeth was 10. She had an older sister, Anna, who never married and a younger brother, also named William. William later moved to the city of Kearney where he was a successful business man, city councilman, and eventually served as mayor.

As an adult John was 5' 8" tall, had a fair complexion, blue eyes and brown hair which he wore long with a roll at the nape of his neck. In later years it was noted that he always kept an erect military bearing and dressed in military cut apparel. In Cheyenne he was known and addressed as "Major". He built a large house on the corner of 27th and Snyder which had a third floor ballroom and was surrounded by landscaped grounds.

For many years Talbot operated a roadhouse between the city of Cheyenne and the fort. He would meet here with Frank North, and Wild Bill Hickock for target contests, usually won by Frank with John coming in second and Wild Bill third.

John Talbot died in Cheyenne on July 13, 1910, from "contusion and bruise of the ascending colon caused by a fall from a street car four or five days before his death. The contusion and bruise resulted in a hemorrhage of the colon which resulted in his death." He had stepped from the streetcar and it started moving on before he had secure footing on the street. He was one month short of turning 78.

Both Mary Talbot, who was living in Kearney, and Elizabeth Talbot in Cheyenne, filed for Widow's Pension. Since Mary could prove her marriage with a copy of her marriage certificate, but Elizabeth could not, Mary was awarded the pension.

Being Catholic, Mary Anne Talbot apparently did not recognize that her husband had divorced her. In the 1880 Census, John Talbot is listed twice, in both Nebraska and Wyoming. In Nebraska Mary Talbot listed him as a liquor dealer. In Cheyenne he is listed as keeping a saloon. In 1900 he was listed in the Wyoming census as a judge. Mary Talbot listed herself as a widow in both 1900 and in 1910. She died in Kearney in 1916 and is buried in the Kearney cemetery in the same plot as her daughter, Lucy Talbot DeLaBarre and family.

At some time following John Talbot's death, Elizabeth Knaggs Talbot, moved back to Kearney. When she died in 1940 she was buried in Cheyenne, Wyoming, beside John Talbot.