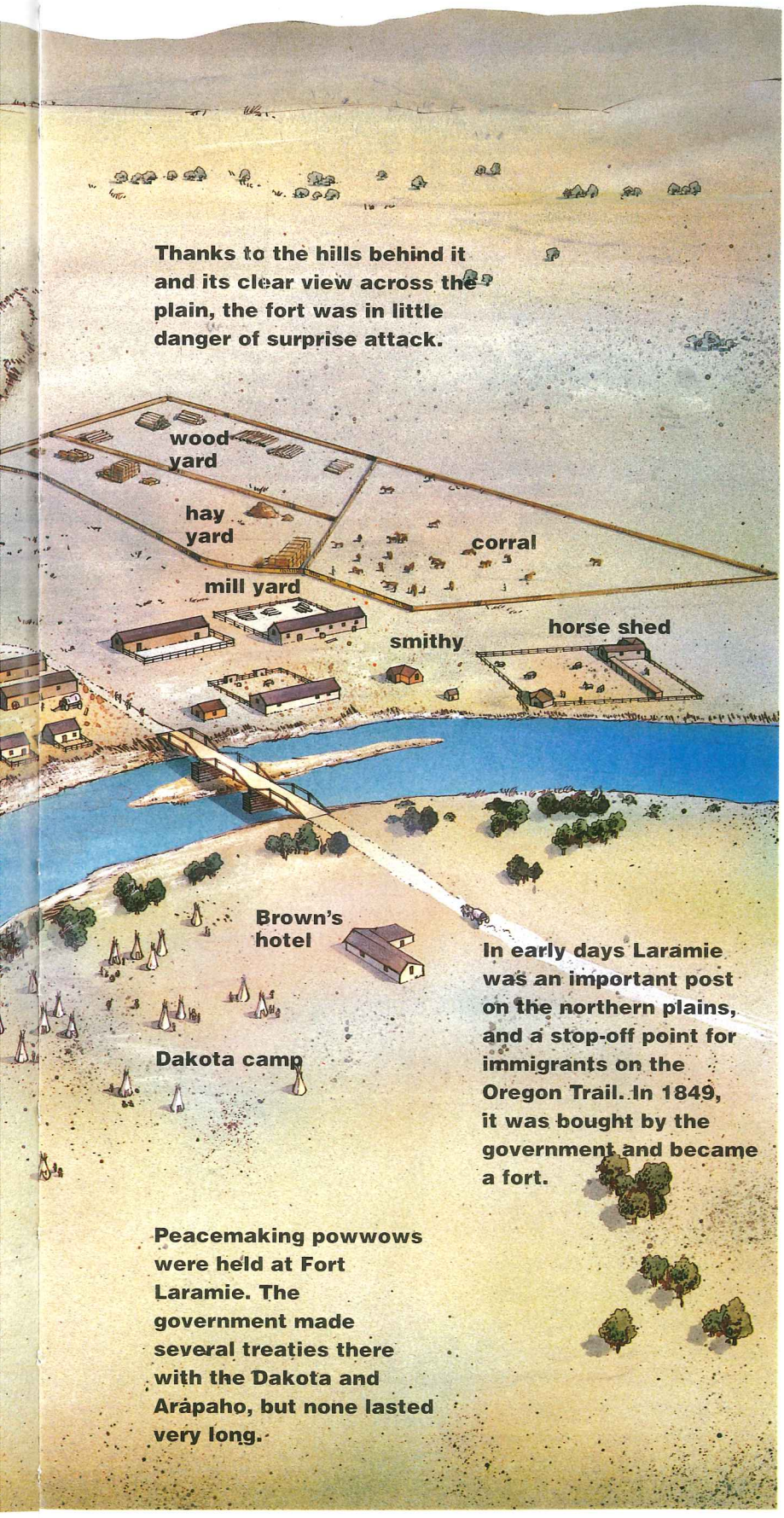
A hard life

Many became soldiers to escape the law, poverty, or to start a new life. Army life was hard and many deserted. Poor supplies meant most food was maggot-infested. The soldiers lacked equipment and clothing. Only the officers lived in comfort. There was even a billiards room for them. The only entertainment for the ordinary soldiers was drinking in the bar.

FORT LIFE

As the United States expanded westward, the army was called in to protect the pioneers against Native Americans wh were defending their homelands. Fort made important bases where the army could house its peacekeeping troops. They were well defended and rarely attacked. As the frontier grew, more a more forts were built, especially durin the Indian wars. Many smaller defenses—called posts, garrisons, or camps—were built too, at strategic sit along the trails, such as river crossing or junctions.



Fort Davis, Texas
This campaign fort once housed black soldiers of the Ninth and Tenth Cavalry and the Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantry. Abandoned in 1891, it today a national monument.

Stopping at a Fort

Before setting out from Independence, the Larkins followed the guidebooks' instructions closely, as they wanted to have enough supplies for the whole trip. However, not all emigrants were so careful, and even those who had packed properly often found they needed extra supplies, so they were very glad of the forts and trading posts along the way.

Right: *A painting of Fort Laramie and the surrounding Indian village by Alfred Jacob Miller.*

Left: *A photographer has set up shop at the fort, and people have pictures taken to send to their relatives.*

Fort Laramie

The Larkins' party has arrived at Fort Laramie, which by 1853 had become a bustling trading post. This fort was established by the American Fur Company in 1834 to buy animal pelts brought in by "mountain men" and Indian trappers (*see opposite page*). By the 1840s, the fur trade had declined, and as the numbers of overlanders had grown, it was realized that more money could be made from selling them goods and offering much-needed services such as a post office, a hospital, and a blacksmith. The sutler, or army provisioner, who supplied the troops with food from his shop also sold goods to the overlanders.

Many people felt that soldiers should be stationed along the wagon trails to protect overlanders against attacks by Indians, and by the 1850s, 90 percent of the U.S. Army was stationed in the West. The army bought Fort Laramie from the American Fur Company for $4,000 in 1849 and it became the first and most important in a string of military garrisons.

Above: *The sign outside the sutler's store boasts that it stocks "all articles a man wants in civilized countries or on the plains."*

"We are thankful that our bacon has kept, as supplies here are very dear. Five dollars won't buy what a dollar bought back East."
Mrs. Larkin's Diary

Although the sight of the cavalry's blue coats made the overlanders feel safe, the army was not really very good at protecting them. Reports of problems with Indians could take days to reach a fort, and sometimes the cavalry's response would be to attack the wrong Indians, which caused more fighting and made the Indians mistrustful of the army and the overlanders. The government's Indian agents, who arranged peace treaties with various Indian tribes in exchange for annual payments, were far more effective than the soldiers. However, the army and the Indians were not completely hostile to one another: Villages of Indians, eager to trade, usually encircled the walls of the stockades.

Right: *Some of the furs traded in the early days at Fort Laramie: Deer, red fox, ermine, river otter, and buffalo.*

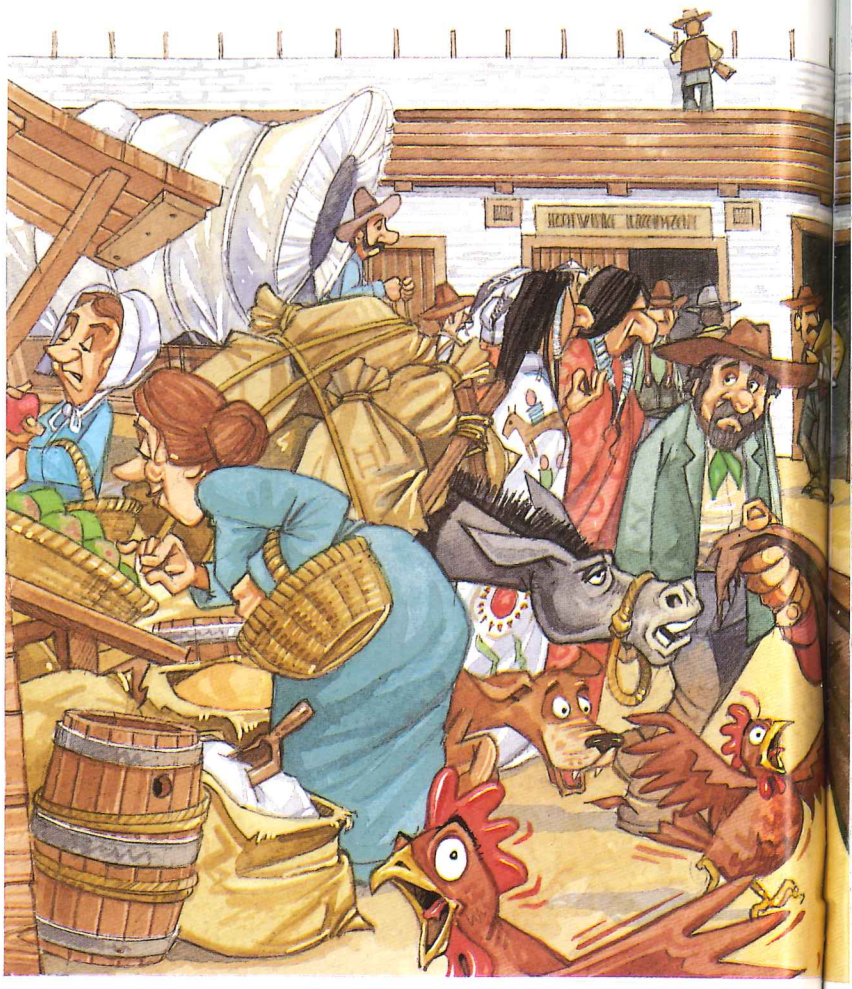
Left: *Infantryman in uniform.*

Above: *Cavalryman's saddle, curry combs and canteen.*

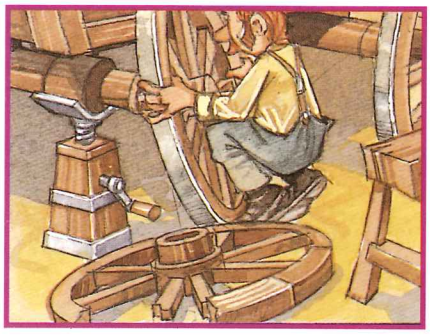
Right: *A soldier's winter overcoat and belt with a powder pouch, bullet bag, and pistol. Cavalrymen usually carried their pistols in holsters, like the ones shown here, slung over the fronts of their saddles.*

At the Fort

Your food is running out, your wagon is falling to bits, and your animals look as though they cannot last another day. There are mountains in the distance that you have to cross. You would never manage all this without a stop at Fort Laramie. This fortified enclosure, far out in the wilds, belongs to the American Fur Company. Officials who buy furs from trappers and Indians live here. You can buy food at the fort's store (if there is any food to spare) and give yourself and your animals a few days' rest.



Lots to Do at the Fort



MENDING. You can borrow tools from the fort's carpentry workshop and give your wagon a good overhaul.

WASHING. Your smelly clothes and blankets get a real scrub at last. Women spend all day at it.

BUYING. You haggle with the storekeeper over his prices, but it doesn't work. He has plenty of other customers.

This is the smelliest group we've had in months!

Darn it!

Handy Hint

Trade your tired animals in for fresh ones. Your old beasts will rest and be sold later.

LISTENING. You will hear lots of different advice about the best route to take across the Rocky Mountains.

RELAXING. There is nothing to worry about for a few days, so you have a dance around the campfire at night.

SLEEPING. You can sleep soundly at night (and all day too if you need to) because there is good security around the fort.

How did the pioneers and Indians get along?

Sometimes they fought, but most meetings were peaceful enough. Indians often came up to wagon trains, hoping to trade buffalo meat or horses for guns, tobacco, cloth, food, or metal fishing hooks. Some Indians even acted as scouts or helped ferry pioneers across rivers. Indians who looked warlike were usually headed to fight an enemy tribe, though some young tricksters did like to steal pioneers' animals. Still, pioneers were afraid of the Indians. In 1847, the United States government set up forts along the trails to help protect the pioneers.

Pioneer and Indian children were fascinated by one another. Ten-year-old Kate McDaniel wrote about the daughter of a Sioux Indian chief who visited her camp in 1853:

"She was about fifteen years old and . . . very beautiful. . . . The little princess, as we liked to call her, let us pet her pony and then she showed us how she could ride and what her pony could do. . . . Then [she] jumped into her saddle, waved her hand to us, and with a little giggling laugh, was gone like a beautiful bird."

If you were a pioneer's stove, where might you end up?

In a furniture graveyard along the trail! As wagons headed into the mountains, many families had to lighten their loads for the tired oxen. Heavy stoves and furniture were often left behind, no matter how treasured they were. Pioneers abandoned dressers, tables, chairs, food, books, stoves, fine china, trunks, tools, bedding, and even a piano.