

HOME OF THE CAVALRY

Photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66



Amidst the great plains of the state of Oklahoma, in Canadian County there stands a permanent fort that was established in 1874. It's the historic Fort Reno. Created 33 years before President Theodore Roosevelt issued Proclamation 780, granting statehood to Oklahoma, it's a symbol and a lasting reminder of America's weathered history following the Civil and Indian Wars, as well as the second World War. It represents the country's ability to evolve and progress through adversity, especially following the trials of war, and demonstrates the civility and compassion that can be shown—even to one's own enemy.

After the Civil War ended, the Union Army turned its attention to the West and its inhabitants—multiple Indian tribes—and its land. Officers and soldiers who survived the War between the States were sent west, charged with creating Indian agencies and forts to help keep the peace as settlers from the East moved onto land that the tribes occupied. The Darlington Agency, named for the area's first Indian Agent, a Quaker named Brinton Darlington, was located at Fort Supply, which was established in the winter months of 1868 and located over 100 miles away to the northwest in Indian Territory, near what is now the corner of the Oklahoma Panhandle. However, additional assistance and protection was needed following the signing of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge, which was intended to remove the natives from the path of American expansion and avoid costly wars. As a result, soldiers established the military encampment that preceded Fort Reno, but aid was still needed for the Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho tribes after the conflict ended.

"Fort Reno was being used to control white encroachment after the signing of the Treaty of Medicine Lodge in 1867," said Craig McVay, retired educator and member of the board of directors for the U.S. Cavalry Association, located at Fort Reno. "Those reservations were set aside as hunting grounds for the natives. The forts maintained the peace for twenty to thirty years." In February of 1876, the fort commander, General Philip Sheridan, named the fort "Reno," after his friend, Major General Jesse L. Reno, who was killed in 1863 at the Battle of South Mountain during the Civil War.

On April 22, 1889, the first Oklahoma Land Run brought thousands to scramble for a quarter-section (160 acres) of land apiece in what would become a half-dozen Oklahoma counties, including Canadian County, home of Fort Reno. Nearby, the town of El Reno sprang up on the south side of the Canadian River with the influx of settlers. Additionally, a community named Reno City was also established, with one community on each side of the Canadian River. But when the railroad announced that their rail lines would be built on the south side of the river, the residents abandoned Reno City and relocated, combining the two towns, which grew into the Canadian County seat.

Beginning in 1908, Fort Reno transitioned from a military post to one of three army quartermaster remount stations for the military, which specialized in horse breeding and training pack mules. The fort herded over 14,000 horses and mules on

the former fort's grounds and transported them worldwide by rail throughout World War I and II to locations including Burma, China, and the South Pacific. These animals became invaluable during the war when soldiers were located in mountainous terrain.

The fort perhaps became most well-known for its operational use during World War II as an internment work camp for over 1,300 German and Italian prisoners of war who were captured in Africa. "They had a commissary, a movie theater that played features in German, a library, and they had three square meals a day," said Deborah Kauffman, full-time volunteer and president of Historic Fort Reno, Inc. "If they wanted to work, they were allowed to work for farmers in the area with supervision, and they were paid." Their presence in the camp eventually led to the development of the Historic Post Chapel on the compound in 1944, which was built by the prisoners themselves. Now a historical landmark on the National Register of Historic Places, it was then regarded as a well-hidden location in the rural area of Canadian County, away from any military activity in Oklahoma City. Now, the rather quaint European-style chapel is popular for military or western-style weddings.

After World War II finally ended, the need for thousands of military animals declined, and the necessity of housing hundreds of prisoners of war disappeared, and once again, the fort was repurposed. The remount depot was decommissioned in 1948, and the facility was turned over to the U.S. Department of Agriculture for its uses. Since then, the fort has been the site of the U.S.D.A.'s Grazing Lands Research Laboratory for the Great Plains.

The complex was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1970. Today, the Fort Reno Visitor Center and Museum is an essential aspect of the site, and Historic Fort Reno, Inc.—a non-profit organization—is responsible for its upkeep. The board members, consisting of seven individuals, including Kauffman, are always looking for volunteers to act as historical interpreters, help maintain the site, or perform as re-enactors. "We are vigorously working to find ways to preserve Fort Reno. If we don't find ways to raise money to restore and maintain it, then due to safety factors, buildings will have to come down," said Kauffman. "We always tell our visitors that [their] admission is helping us keep this place open."

Like many other historical buildings and locations around the country, one can always rely on recorded incidents of paranormal sightings to pique interest. One such incident occurred in the summer of 2022. "We had a picture taken of one of our re-enactors on the steps of the Post Chapel," said Kauffman. "And in the picture, we caught an image of a boy standing behind her with an orb in his chest." You can learn chilling stories from Fort Reno's long history while exploring the site, guided by lantern light. Ghosts or not, this site has marked undeniably important eras of American history, and any spirits, real or imagined, might just be a reminder to make sure that the history of the diverse people that worked, lived, or were held there, is never forgotten.