The Kansas Frontier, 1869-1870: 
Lt. Samuel Tillman’s First Tour of Duty

edited by Dwight L. Smith

As a newly commissioned officer, whose destiny would take him to the superintendence of the U.S. Military Academy, Samuel Tillman reported for duty at Fort Riley, Kansas, on October 1, 1869, on the eve of his twenty-second birthday. Samuel Escue Tillman (1847-1942) was born into a large family on a middle Tennessee plantation. His father, Lewis Tillman, a Seminole war veteran who was prominent in local affairs, held county offices, served as editor of a Shelbyville, Tennessee, newspaper, and was elected to a term in the U.S. House of Representatives.1

Young Samuel's semi-classical education under the instruction of an uncle was interrupted when the nearby academy was closed because of the coming of the Civil War. The war years were exciting as middle Tennessee, ambivalent in its loyalties, was interchangeably occupied by Federal and Confederate forces. Although he was too young for military duty, on one occasion Samuel was pressed into service; but utilizing his familiarity with the countryside he managed to evade his assignment within a few hours.2

After the war, he received a presidential appointment at-large to the U.S. Military Academy. Before beginning his formal training, he spent several months at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, in preparation for the entrance examination at the academy. Plebe Tillman began his cadet training at West Point on July 1, 1865. He graduated near the head of his class in 1889 and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Fourth Artillery.

His service at Fort Riley and his scouting on the northern Kansas frontier was terminated when he received orders to report back to West Point where he would become an instructor in chemistry, mineralogy, and geology. This was to be Tillman’s pattern of life—assignments to the western frontier and to Tasmania, interspersed with classroom duties at the academy—until his retirement in 1911. In the former capacity, he was transferred to the Corps of Engineers and had tours of duty with the geographical surveys west of the 100th Meridian under George M. Wheeler; and in 1874-1875 he was assigned as an astronomer to Tasmania to observe the transit of Venus. In his capacity as instructor, he wrote several of the textbooks for the academy’s courses and became head of his academic department.

Tillman made fragmentary drafts and notes for lectures he gave on the experiences of his childhood, his West Point years, and his western and Tasmanian ventures. He also kept sketchy diaries of some of his tours of duty. Drawing upon these, he wrote an autobiographical account of his career. He omitted his years as a faculty member at the academy because he felt that they were sufficiently documented by institutional records and reports.3

This excerpt of his autobiography is concerned with his months in Kansas until he reported to the academy on August 25, 1870, to become an instructor. In his essentially anecdotal account, Tillman describes how a newly commissioned officer was broken in, and he gives a glimpse of the 1869-1870 Kansas frontier. It is taken

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2. In the spring of 1863, the Army of the Cumberland under William Rosecrans forced Confederate Braxton Bragg to withdraw from his occupation of Tillman's area of middle Tennessee. Bragg's soldiers "impressed" wagons and teams to facilitate the retreat. In the absence of the plantation slaves, Tillman was ordered to drive a two-horse wagon to the Confederate camp where he would be assigned further duties. En route to the camp he evaded his mounted escort and returned home. Samuel E. Tillman, autobiography (see note 3); Thomas Lawrence Connelly, Autumn of Glory: The Army of Tennessee, 1862-1865 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 119-54.

3. For biographical data see obituary notice, Army and Navy Register, June 27, 1942; and a biographical sketch of Samuel's brother, George Newton Tillman, in National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York: James T. White and Co., 1924) 8:278.

There are two principal surviving Tillman manuscripts directly relevant to his Kansas tour of duty in 1869-1870. Samuel E. Tillman,
from Tillman's holograph manuscript in the library at the U. S. Military Academy, West Point, New York.

There is evidence that Tillman considered his manuscript as a rough draft and that he had begun to put it into more readable form. This is the justification for the editorial devices introduced herein. Paragraphing, capitalization, deletion of repeated words or phrases, and transcription of casual flourishes into punctuation marks are introduced silently. Extraneous details or passages are omitted by ellipses.

As a commissioned officer, I reported for duty at my first station Ft. Riley Kansas on the 1st of Oct. 1869. The captain of the battery to which I had been assigned (B. 4th Art.) had sent a vehicle to the R. R. station to take me to the post, with the invitation to be his guest until I should be assigned quarters of my own. I was with him for several days during which he imparted to me much valuable information relating to the duties of a 2nd Lt. I came rapidly to the conclusion that my captain, H. C. Hasbrouck was a very high type of man and a wholly admirable character, a conclusion fully confirmed by close association several years later, when he and I were stationed at W. P. [West Point] he as a commandant of cadets and I a professor of one of the departments of instruction.¹

I went on duty as a commissioned officer for the first time the next morning, Oct. 2nd 1869 which was my 22nd birthdate. The official personnel present at the post at that time, including the chaplain consisted of 21 officers. Of these, nine were married and 12 were bachelors. The latter group had their meals at a little mess which was run by the widow of an army sergeant and her two daughters. At that time Ft. Riley was the school for light artillery and there were four batteries stationed there, one each from the 1st 2nd 3rd and 4th regiments of artillery.²

The capt. of the battery from the 1st Regt. of Art. was the acting commandant of the post in the absence of

5. The School of Application for Light Artillery (1869-1871), had a complement of some four hundred men. The curriculum consisted principally of practice and field experience supplemented with critiques and theoretical instruction. Woodbury F. Pride. The History of Fort Riley (Fort Riley, Kan.: Cavalry School, Book Department, 1920), 157-58, 165, 166.

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¹ "Experiences in the Great West" (lecture text, March 18, 1893). Special Collections Department, Miami University Libraries, Oxford, Ohio. Samuel E. Tillman, holograph autobiography, library, U. S. Military Academy, West Point, New York. Tillman had begun a revision, but he never progressed with this project beyond his cadet days at West Point.


³ Capt. Henry Cornelius Hasbrouck, Fourth Artillery, was a graduate in the class of 1861 from the U. S. Military Academy, and he was commandant of cadets at West Point from 1882 to 1888. No. 1908, Register of Graduates and Former Cadets of the United States Military Academy (West Point: West Point Alumni Foundation, 1970); Francis B. Heitman, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, from its Organization, September 29, 1789, to March 2, 1903, 2 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903) 1:569.

West Point Cadet Samuel Escue Tillman.
the regular commandant," he was a bvt. brig. gen. from his Civil War service and had a fine war record and was a strict disciplinarian. From his first appearance in the morning he kept an orderly within calling distance until he discharged him at night. The orderly followed him wherever he went within the limits of the post. Shortly after my arrival I was appointed adjutant of the post to replace the officer in that position who was going on leave. This appointment carried with it several other responsibilities besides the regular duties of the adjutancy among which were the supervision of the post gardens and of the post bakery. With my lack of previous experience in any of my new duties I was kept quite fully and interestingly occupied.

A couple of weeks after I became adjutant the general's orderly came one night at about 10:30 to my quarters just as I was getting ready for bed and told me that the gen. wished to see me immediately. I hurriedly dressed and went to the hqrs. building, reported to the gen. in his office there. He began in a very informal way to tell me of certain observations that he had made that day during his meanderings about the post and said that it would improve appearances somewhat to have the "labor detail do certain things the next day and that he wished me to see that they were done." The next morning after the gen. reached his office and he and I had gone through the usual routine of the office business for the day and I was ready to leave, I asked, "Is there anything further this morning, General?" He replied, "Nothing only don't forget what I told you last night."

Within a week a precisely similar incident occurred only the orderly came to my quarters a little later, just after 11:00 o'clock. I went and reported to the gen. and again received instructions about something to be attended to the next day. The next day arrived and after the regular office routine was over, the gen. again reminded me "not to forget what he told me the night before." Later on I was sent for at night a 3rd time and received instructions for the next day. The following morning after the usual office routine I asked the gen., "Is it really necessary to call me out at night to receive instructions that can be equally well given the next morning?" He instantly showed irritation and after a slight hesitation replied, "If the adjutant's duties are not agreeable to you I will relieve you of them." This announcement and his manner in making it, coupled with my experience as adjutant up to date caused me to reply, "I would be pleased if you would." My relief took place very promptly.

My duties and service as a whole at Riley from Oct. 1st 69 to April 1st 1870 were most agreeable. My able, interested and admirable captain [Hasbroock] was easy of approach and ever ready to give a beginner the benefit of his experience. The 1st sergeant of the battery too was a first class man and had been a battery commander himself in the Civil War. In physique, carriage and bearing he was a model soldier and at our first meeting won my admiration which never lessened during our service together.

In the spring of 1870 the guns were left behind and the battery temporarily converted into a troop of cavalry and directed to take station on one of the headwater branches of the Republican River. This placed us... west of Riley and just west of the advancing line of homesteads. That temporary service was most delightful and gave me many interesting experiences, some of which were quite extraordinary.

The morning of the first day upon which we left Riley gave me a reputation as a pistol shot but it was lost before night. I was riding with Capt. H. at the head of the column and we saw a quite handsome skunk moving slowly along 25 or 30 yards to our right. He gave me permission to fire at it with my revolver. This I did without dismounting and to both my own and his surprise I killed the animal. Later in the day when we were hunting a suitable place for our wagons to cross a

6. This refers to Capt. W. H. Graham of Battery K. The school's components consisted of contingents from the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Artilleries. They were designated as Light Batteries K, A, C, and B, respectively. See Pride, History of Fort Riley, 157-58.

7. Notwithstanding the impression that Tillman gives that the batteries went into the field on or about April 1, 1870, it was probably on or about May 1. The battle gave a public muster and review at Fort Riley on April 30, and Tillman was present on that occasion. See Pride, History of Fort Riley, 165.

8. Once in the field, however, the cavalry units were dispersed to separate locations in that general area. According to Tillman, "three of the Light Batteries...went into the field as Cavalry. Camps were made on the Saline, Solomon, and Republican Rivers... Captain Hasbroock's camp being on the Solomon. We scouted to the north, west, and south of our camp, near Jewell[! City]." Tillman, "Experiences in the Great West."

Fort Riley and other permanent military installations in frontier Kansas served such purposes as bases of operations for an area or for the protection of communication and travel routes. Temporary camps or outposts operated for a few weeks or months as determined by specific military needs. Tillman's camp "near Jewell City" was not "Fort Camp Jewell on the site of present Jewell City" in Jewell County. Fort Camp Jewell and other ad hoc facilities in Kansas had served as a refuge for the neighboring settlers during the Indian troubles of the 1860s. It would seem that the scout for Tillman's group ranged from the Solomon River in Mitchell County to the north of their camp in Jewell County "near Jewell City." Marvin H. Garfield, "The Military Post as a Factor in the Frontier Defense of Kansas, 1865-1869," Kansas Historical Quarterly 1 (November 1931): 50, 59.
For his first tour of duty in 1869, newly commissioned Second Lieutenant Tillman was posted to Fort Riley, shown here in an 1862 sketch and in a photograph probably taken two years before Tillman's arrival.
gulch my horse suddenly shied to the left due to a high piercing note which I recognized as a rattlesnake's alarm. I looked in the direction of the alarm and not over 15 or 20 feet I discovered the snake, coiled with his head well up. Without dismounting I drew my revolver and to my still greater surprise I shot the snake through the head.

Late in the afternoon after we were preparing to go into camp for the night another rattler was discovered and I was called to bring my revolver and kill him. I went rather reluctantly for I doubted whether I could have a third piece of such luck as I had had during the day; and I did not, for I fired five times at a distance of only 8 or 10 feet and missed every time. I had shot quite well with the carbine at target practice in the post, but neither before nor since that morning did I ever shoot so well with the revolver....

A couple of months after we had reached our permanent camp that spring Lt. S. R. Jones⁹ and I had an experience which could not have been repeated four years later and will probably never come to any one again. With a detachment of 13 men we were on a scouting expedition during which we rode 15 or 20 miles with thousands of bison almost continually within our sight. These animals were at that time, in this country universally called buffalo. As we were approaching the herd we first came upon small groups of them varying in number from 10 to 100, but in a short time, as we advanced, we were surrounded by them in numbers that could not be estimated and such continued to be the case during the time that we circled through the herd. The great herd of these animals which annually passed over western Kansas in their feed migrations north and south had not then been divided into two, one remaining south and the other N. of U.P.R.R. [Union Pacific Railway Co. tracks] all the year as it was a little later. Our horses at first contact with the herd were considerably excited but soon became indifferent to them.

At one point in our scout we came upon three men each from a separate state who had accidentally fallen together and who had decided to locate homesteads adjoining each other.¹⁰ They had built a house and surrounded it by a small circular stockade of upright posts about 8 feet high. At the entrance to the stockade was a stepladder constructed of two posts running up about 18' which gave a lookout extending for a considerable distance in several directions over the plain. At the time we reached the stockade the men were all absent and occupied in keeping the passing bison from destroying the growing corn which was now well up. This they did by firing off their guns into the air in front of the approaching herd which caused the animals to change direction and pass around to the right and left of the gun reports for sometime but those far in rear were likely to retain the original direction.

Upon seeing our party one of the homesteaders came up and said that they would be glad to give us something to eat if we would send some of our soldiers to guard the corn while they prepared it. We informed them that we all had brought lunches, including coffee in our canteens. He immediately suggested to Jones and me a cup of hot coffee, which we accepted. Some of our soldiers were sent down to guard the fields and the other two men came to the stockade. When necessary the soldiers were directed to discharge their guns into the air, not shoot the passing buffalo.
The memory of that cup of coffee was indelibly fixed
in my mind by a remark that one of the frontiersmen
made to Jones upon noticing that he wished no sugar
in his coffee and that I had required a rather unusual
amount, which was, "I see that you take the beverage for
the aroma of the bean, while your friend takes his for
the saccharin element of the sugar."

Although we were in close contact with the buffaloes
for several hours that day only one was shot at by any of
our party and that was to try [to] determine whether the
assertion so often then made was true viz., that the long
coarse hair of the forehead of the old bulls was often
so clogged with earthy and vegetable matter that it was
impenetrable to any ordinary rifle. Just before leaving
the stockade Lt. Jones and I went down to a nearby
water run where the buffalo were watering and cooling
themselves. Jones standing not more than 40' from and
above a large bull directly facing him fired at his bushy
forehead with a Springfield rifle. I was to the left of
Jones and somewhat nearer the animal watching to
observe the effect of the shot. I thought that the animal
moved his head slightly just at the discharge of the rifle
which might have prevented a square hit; but in any
case he rushed off with his companions giving his head
certain peculiar side shakes which we both observed.
We did not consider the test conclusive.

For several days after the return from that scout to
our camp, buffalo were still near us in small groups,
grazing and slowly following on the trail of the great
herd. The very next day Capt. Hasbrouck sent Lt. Miller
and myself with a wagon and a small detachment to
procure fresh meat for the command. We started very
early and soon came in sight of a group of 15 of the
animals located on a small knoll with gentle depressions
on each side of it. Some were standing but the greater
number lying down. Miller and I [were] accompanied
by the sergt. [and] the wagon and made our way to the
lee side of the animals and approached them to within
about a 70 yards, good shooting distance. We were
desirous of shooting only those promising good beef
and at our distance were uncertain which of the animals
to shoot.

After short consideration we concluded to fire first
at those standing selecting the ones that appeared most
promising. We fired simultaneously each at a different
animal and at a vital spot. We each brought down our
targets and were prepared to fire again quickly, but to

11. Probably this was Lt. Crosby Parke Miller, Fourth Artillery;
he was a Civil War veteran and member of the U.S. Military Academy
class of 1867. No. 2173, Register of Graduates; Heitman, Historical Regis-
ter, I:710.
our intense surprise none of the animals started away. Those lying down, arose. All seemed utterly confused by the struggling efforts of their wounded companions. We each fired one more round and the volley brought down two more and not until we arose and were seen by the poor beasts did the unwounded run away. We immediately made signals to our wagon to come up and promptly proceeded to butcher our wild bees, taking such parts of each as we had been instructed would be best suited to our purpose.

This was my first and only experience in shooting buffalo. It impressed both Lt. Miller and myself as though we had killed some quite tame and inoffensive animals. The purpose for which we had done so was our only self justification. Neither he nor I ever shot another buffalo though we had abundant opportunity. No doubt to hunt, pursue them on horseback and shoot them with bows and arrows as did the Indians was exciting and involved some danger as well. The same can be said of chasing them on horseback and shooting them with revolvers as was done by some frontiersmen and other white men for the meat that they furnished. Between 1870-80 the animals were killed in large numbers for their skins which were readily transformed into excellent carriage robes etc.

My service as a cavalryman was terminated about the 15th of Aug. by an order from the W. D. [War Department] directing me to report for duty at W. P. N. Y. [West Point, New York] on the 28th of that month. That order also ended my service in Kansas and my service with the Light Battery B of the 4th Art. My entire experience since reporting at Riley on the 1st of the preceding Oct. had been very pleasant and informing and I was for several reasons sorry to leave. I especially regretted parting so soon from Capt. Hashbrouck and the other officers of our battery and from a half dozen other officers of the post. However regret at leaving was diminished by the satisfaction of knowing that the detail to W. P. so soon after graduation was generally considered a compliment. Immediately upon the receipt of that order Capt. H. told me that I might leave the command as soon as I desired in order to return to Riley, arrange my affairs there and pass by father's home on the way to W. P.

My limited service in Kansas had given me no experience with the Indians but it had made me acquainted for the 1st time with several species of wildlife besides the bison. These were caribou (or elk), antelope, coyotes, the large gray timber wolf, badgers, prairie dogs and their villages and the other occasional inhabitants thereof. I have seen a large snake (rattlesnake I think), small owls and prairie dogs disappear in holes in the ground near each other in the same dog village, but could never be sure that any of these went into the same hole with the other. I have often heard it asserted by frontiersmen that they had seen them tumble into the same hole, and that they lived on friendly terms with each other; but the difficulty of determining the accuracy of these latter statements has always made me doubtful of them.

I left our camp to go to the nearest station on the Kansas Pacific Road to take the train to Ft. Riley. The station was Ft. Harker,12 about 80 miles distant nearly due south of our camp.13 It was arranged that I should take two days for the journey, spending the intermediate night at the camp of Capt. Ramsay14 whose battery was on similar duty to that with which I had been serving. One enlisted man was to accompany me to take back my horse.

My last night in camp in Kansas was emphasized by a heavy rainfall which developed a fact that we had not before discovered, viz. that our tent was standing in a slight depression and water had accumulated to a depth of 2 or 3 inches; however, I was up and ready to depart at the appointed time, which was 2 hours before sunup. The early hour gave me a remarkable experience which I think is worthy of record because of the implication it gives of the abundance of game in Kansas at that time.

About an hour after we had left our camp...I discovered a small flock of wild turkeys starting the ascent of a small ridge sloping down to the flat in which we were riding. It immediately occurred to me that, it would be an admirable surprise to Capt. Ramsay to have with me upon reaching his camp a wild turkey. Accordingly, I dismounted [and] gave the reins of my halter to my escort and started on foot with my carbine to try to

13. Tillman’s “80 miles” distance between his camp and Fort Harker is an apparent contradiction in his location of the camp “being on the Solomon...near Jewel City.” See note 8.
14. Whether “80 miles” is an error by Tillman or whether it is an instance of uncertain transcription from Tillman’s holograph manuscript, it may well be the latter. Elsewhere he wrote “sixty miles” as the distance. Tillman, “Experiences in the Great West.”
15. “Sixty miles’ resolves the apparent contradiction. This would place the camp about midway between Jewel and Beloit near the Jewell-Mitchell County line on Plum, Mulberry, or Dog Creek, all tributaries of the Solomon River.
16. Cape. Joseph Cates Ramsay, Third Artillery, was a Civil War veteran. Heitman, Historical Register, 1:813. Ramsay’s camp was probably located on the Saline River. See note 8.
intercept the turkeys. Upon nearing the summit of [the] spur, I did not see the turkeys again; but looking to my right toward the timber which marked a small stream in the flat below, I saw 2 gray timber wolves; and sweeping my vision around to my front and left it fell upon a group of 11 bison and further along to the left were a small group of antelope and as I was attempting to count them I saw gradually arise from the ground higher on the ridge, square to my left (according to my count) 27 caribou (elk). All of these animals were in sight at the same time long enough for me to count them with fair accuracy except the antelope.

One other incident in returning to Ft. Riley was my meeting for the first time with Gen. Miles, which took place at Fort Harker. He then had only the rank of Lt. Col.18

Upon reaching Ft. Riley I hurriedly packed my limited possessions, entrusted the real estate which I had purchased in the neighboring town (Junction City) to a lawyer and was ready to depart for the East…. During the winter of 69 and 70 I had spent considerable time in reading law and this lawyer friend had loaned me the necessary books.16 That which caused me to study law that winter was the fact that, a board of officers was in session considering the military records of all officers with the view of removing from the army as many as could be disposed of without injustice, under one of the several available methods, the object being to benefit the service as a whole by the removal of the least qualified.17 This board was not inappropriately called the [Benzine?] Board. My class had only been commissioned in the preceding June and I did not know but that some, if not all, of us might be deemed fit subjects for discharge without injustice if given, say a year’s pay in addition to the education that we had received at the expense of the government. Anyhow I thought it advisable to make some preparation for such possibility and so studied law under the direction of my lawyer friend.

The wives of two of the officers stationed at Riley had concluded to return to the East along with me, and we set out together; but I was compelled to part from them at Indianapolis in order to see my father’s family on the way to W. P.….18

On the 26th of August 1870 I reported for duty as an officer on my first detail to W. P. I was assigned to duty as an instructor in the Department of Chemistry, Mineralogy and Geology.


16. The Junction City Weekly Union, May 13, 1869, listed the "Attorneys at Law" as "White and Austin; S. B. White; Canfield, McClure and Claggett; Gilpatrick and Caswell; John W. Williams; and H. H. Snyder." Of these, Tillman’s mentor may have been Stephen B. White, the settlement’s first lawyer. He had lived in the area since 1854. Pride, History of Post Riley, 190, 195.

17. Congress put a hold on commissions, promotions, and enlistments and ordered a reduction in the number of officers to achieve a considerable cutback in the size of the army. U.S. Statutes at Large vol. 15 (December 1867-March 1869), "An Act making Appropriations for the Support of the Army for the Year ending June third, eighteen hundred and seventy, and for other Purposes" March 3, 1869.

18. The Tillman homestead was near Shelbyville, Tennessee.