Fort Larned

The Santa Fe Trail stretched from Missouri to Santa Fe. In 1859, Fort Larned was established near the midpoint of the trail.

Over time, traffic increased on the Santa Fe Trail. In a six-month period in 1859, it was estimated that 2,300 men, 1,970 wagons, 840 horses, 4,000 mules, 15,000 oxen, 73 stage coach carriages, and more than 3.8 million pounds of freight went west on the trail. In western Kansas the Santa Fe Trail passed through the lands of the Kiowa and Comanche. As more and more wagons traveled through their land, the Indians’ way of life became more disrupted. This increased the hostilities between the tribes and the Americans.

What was the original purpose of Fort Larned?
In the spring of 1859 Jacob Hall had authorization from the U.S. Postmaster to build a mail station at Pawnee Fork. Hall was forced by the Kiowa and Comanche to retreat. The postmaster urged the military to send troops to Pawnee Fork. In the fall Jacob Hall sent men and materials back to the site to build the mail station.

The soldiers protected the mail station. They also escorted the stagecoaches carrying the mail along 140 miles of the trail. When they were not busy protecting the mail, they were busy building their camp. Sod buildings were constructed, but some troops remained in tents. A few months later the name of the post was changed to "Camp Alert" because the soldiers had to watch for Indians. Soon, more permanent structures were built and the post was renamed Fort Larned.

Fort Larned also was the site of an Indian Agency. The United States government negotiated treaties with Indian tribes. The Indians gave up their lands, either by agreement or force, and were in turn promised payment. The government’s Indian agent made sure the tribes received their payments, either in money or merchandise. These payments lasted over a period of years. The agent also was charged with protecting the trade rights of the Indians.
During the Civil War many of the army troops at Fort Larned returned east to protect the Union. Western outposts like Fort Larned relied on volunteer troops. The Plains Indians increased their resistance to Americans taking over their lands. During the war the contact between the soldiers and the Indians increased. However, the fort never was attacked.

What was it like to be stationed at Fort Larned?
The soldiers at Fort Larned lived fairly isolated lives. The city of Larned was not established until 13 years after the fort was established. In the beginning the housing was inadequate. Food had to be shipped in from a great distance and often was spoiled.

Some soldiers fell asleep while on duty and still others left the post without permission. Some even deserted to escape the rough life. Any soldier who failed to live up to military regulations was punished. A soldier might be confined to the guardhouse or forced to give up pay. A soldier also could be sentenced to hard labor or confined in a small sweatbox for punishment.

Most men followed the military regulations and were rewarded with free time. The post had a library and some men would spend their free time reading or visiting with other soldiers. Keeping in contact with those at home was important, so time was spent writing letters. Games such as horse races, baseball, and horseshoe pitching were popular. Card games and impromptu musical entertainment also were common activities.

What happened to Fort Larned?
- The military actively occupied the post from 1859 to 1878. Its closing came about because the stagecoaches that once carried the mail were replaced by railroads. The Indian Agency was moved with many of the Indians into Oklahoma.
- The land at the fort was transferred to the General Land Office and sold to settlers. A portion of the land was given as a land grant to the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad. The land with the post buildings on it sold at auction to the Pawnee Valley Stock Breeders’ Association.
- The old fort buildings continued to change owners but eventually were used in a successful family ranching business.
- Today, some of Fort Larned has been rebuilt or restored and is open to the public as a national historic site, operated by the National Park Service.