

LETTERS FROM FT. CRAIG

Written by: Cpl. Clarence Chrisman, Company F, 13th U.S. Infantry, Feb. 27-Mar. 10, 1885

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Ft. Craig, NM

Feb. 27th, '85 (1885)

Dear Mother,

No doubt you will think that I should have written earlier and told you all about the trip I made to this place but I beg pardon on the grounds of having a use a few days to recuperate and to get everything arranged so as to have thing comfortable and convenient in the future. We are settled down nice and comfortable now for the summer and the anticipation of a pleasant and a far more exciting and agreeable life than the former one.

I am wondering from when I intended to write when I commenced if no doubt would rather have [?] about the trip I had than anything else but I hardly know how or where to begin. So particular [it] would no doubt tire you and as to whether I can ... our exploits and adventures generally and do it comprehensively I doubt very much. Altogether we were fourteen days on the road for eight days the only water we had was that which we secured by melting snow and it would seem that the more you drank of that the more you wanted so for hours we would be in camp with parched tongues and burning throat eagerly eyeing the camp bottles of ice cold water but not daring to drink thereof knowing full well that it would only augment my seemingly unnecessary thirst [?] we got from Wingate and the higher we ascended the continental divide the deeper got the snow and the colder the weather. One day we traveler about thirty five miles through a blinding snow storm and huge snow drifts so cold and disagreeable was it that we had to walk to keep from freezing to death and then when we got into camp that night we did not know where we were, all we knew was that we were really and truly lost in the mountains. Next morning we knew but very little more and I am sure we never would have found our way out had we not taken the back trail to where we started from and from that point taking a new road and a less snowy one. Although it snowed for seven days while we were out we were quite sure none of it fell from the sky. It was so cold and the wind was blowing so hard that I think the storms were caused by the snow blowing across the valleys from mountain to mountain. Sometimes when the wind would stop blowing the sun would come out brightly and would cheer us up for awhile, but while it was cheering us up it also burnt our faces and when we got into camp our faces would smart and pain so that we could not go near the camp fire to warm ourselves.

One night I and my bed fellow, or "bunkee" as we call them in the army, made our bunks down on a nice bare spot when the wind had blown all the grass away away and piling the brush behind us thought we would have a nice [?] place to sleep. Just imagine how astonished we were when on awakening the next morning we were so completely covered with snow that we could scarcely crawl from under the weight of it, and wasn't that a nice place to arrange our toilet - I guess our toilet wasn't wasn't very elaborate that morning. I would have liked to have had some of those fellows back there who sleep on feather beds all their lives to have been there that morning. I used to think it was hard to have to get up in a cold room but the coldest room in the world would be a paradise [sic] compared to a cold, dreary and desolate snow clad mountain top and getting up on those mercilessly cold mornings was not the worst of it either.

Should you happen to be on guard you would have to crawl out sometime about that hour of night when the witches are supposed to be frolicing [sic] about in all their glory and walk all around the camp through the whistling wind and pelting snow for a few hours. That was very funny wasn't it?

After we had been out about seven days the snow began to feel lighter and soon we were out of the snow altogether and from that time on our trip was very pleasant indeed, except for one day and then it would have been all right if we had found water but we did not so we had to go without a drink of any kind until almost

morning when five or six of the fellows who had walked eight or ten miles to a town brought back several canteens full of water. I was on frost when they got back and you can bet I didn't say much until I had taken a good drink.

It's a terrible thing to have to make a dry camp, especially do the animals suffer, although it is said that a government mule is the toughest thing in the world.

It is about ten o'clock at night and I am getting so sleepy and am mixing things up so bad and writing so poorly that I think I will stop and go to bed. I am not used to sitting up so late for at Wingate we had to turn in at 9 o'clock there, however we are not restricted to garrison regulation and can sit up all night if we feel so inclined.

Good night Mother dear. Pleasant dreams and a bright morrow to you. I would like to kiss little Pearl good night but I can't so you will have to kiss her for me the night after this letter reaches you.

Feb. 28th

Received a letter from my friend Halley in Wingate yesterday and in it was yours and several other letters that had come for me since I left there. Was very, very glad indeed to hear from you. Was not at all disappointed to learn that you did not admire the shots I sent you. I didn't think for a moment that you would like it but as you were so very anxious to have some sort of a representation or rather misrepresentation of me I thought I would send it any how. If you read that little piece in the Youths confirmation entitled "Having your picture taken" you would know how to account for the strange and sad expression of any countenance. I assure you that I do not always have such an unpleasant expression on my features.

I am fully aware dear mother that I am not physically handsome nor did I used to be very handsome mentally but honestly I believe that I have improved greatly in the latter respect since I left home. My comrades accredit me with having a good disposition and pleasant bearing, and dear mother, have you found that I have been quite as generous as my means will permit of? If I haven't been I am sure it is no fault of mine for I have endeavored to be, and always shall I hope. Please do not think for a moment that I intend to say that you have thought otherwise of me for I know you have not and I also know that what small favors I have been able to do you have been highly appreciated by you and the rest of the family, and be assured that the many kind favors and blessings that you and all of the family have showered upon me since I have been in the service, have been doubly appreciated and associated with the tenderest and kindness of actions by you most obedient and loving son. I love you all with my hearts fest love and be we separated by land or by sea my love and affections are bound to you all with tendrils so strong and enduring that nothing worldly could possibly be strong enough to sever them. What is it that cheers me up and gives me courage to face the world and its hardships and difficulties if it is not fond and loving recollections of home and the dear one who await me there and who I am so longing to see and once more clasp to my aching heart in fond embrace. Were it not for these sweet ties of love and the far off hope of and again being with those so dear to me life would indeed to be dreary, melancholy and endless void as it is. However I have many things to cheer me up and make life worth living. I have everything to be thankful for and no reason whatever to be dissatisfied and am sure that as long as I have a loving Father, Mother, Brothers and Sisters, I never will be. I am so glad that you heard from Joe, he is a queer fellow I must say, I can't see for the life of me why it is that he so dreads to write home and tell you how he is getting along. Yes indeed Harry is lucky to get such a good and industrious wife. I know he will get along swell for I think Harry has an aptitude for making money and if he only has some one to teach him how to save it he will be all right. I am just the opposite of Harry, I have a good idea of how to keep money after I get it but the getting it is what always bothered me more than anything else.

There is one good thing about me [?] and that is I have use for a very small amount of the "filthy stuff." So little legal tender is required for my army personal use that if I had a very great amount of it I wouldn't know what to do with it. So you see Mother you must never think I am robbing myself when I send you the little that I do for it is of no use to me whatever and I consider you as doing me a great favor when you take it off my hands.

It's quite time I think that "money that comes easy, goes easy." I think if I was out side of the Army and had to swing and pick and shovel during the hot summer days for the almighty dollar a day, when I got one of them earned it would look as large and a grindstone and as to whether I could be induced to part with one of them except to benefit certain persons well known to yourself would be very doubtful. However it is to be hoped that I will wield something else besides a pick or shovel when once again I shall be a citizen. Let us hope that it will be a pencil and that the sielder of the same will gain and honest and profitable livelihood by the skill with which he manipulates the aforesaid instrument.

Yes Mother I am struck on the idea of securing a first class education in art, even if I have to go on the tramp after I secure it. I know there jis a little talent in me and I think that under the proper instruction it will be brought to light and after it has once been properly trained and cultivated will be the means of securing its owner profitable and pleasant employment.

Wouldn't it be grand if I could but soar away up into the highest heaven of art and someday be a son that you would be proud of and one that would have sufficient means to plentifully provide for you in the autumn of your existance [sic]. Oh me, my heart grows sad with the thought that such things can never be and that such a transition from my present tation in life would be too great a one to ever be realized.

Well I guess I a tiring you with my useless talking of things that can never so I will change the subject.

In the last few weeks I have seen many different varieties [sic] of climate. When we left Wingate it was a lovely sun shiny day but before we had gone many miles from there we met with weather as severe and cold as any I ever saw, and for several days we could almost imagine we were on some sort of a Greeley expedition or other and that we were as near finishing the north pole as any one could have been. After we got out of the mountains and fairly crossed the continental divide we were again ushered into beautiful spring like weather and when we arrive here we found the weather was almost like summer. Indeed it is so warm here that the grass is already green and even the "never to be gotten away from" house fly has begin to put in his appearance. The Rio Grande runs about a hundred yards from our quarters and we go down almost every day boating and fishing. Geese, ducks, deer, and in fact almost every kind of game abound on and near the river and you may well believe we exercise all our skill and ingenuity to secure enough of them for our own personal use. While on the road down here we saw hundreds of large herds of antelope and deep but not having time enough to hunt them in we did not secure any it was impossible to get near enough to get a shot at them without taking considerable time and so we did not try except only once in awhile one or two of us would stroll off a short distance from the wagons in the vain endeavor to get within rifle shot of them on the open prairie. We shot no deer on the road but we did manage to get away with a young beef and several mutton so you see we did not suffer for the want of fresh meat. I saw many pretty sights and seems on the road and if you will be so kind as to send me some drawing paper and pencils I will endeavor to portray them as accurately as my recollections will permit. The most beautiful scene I saw was one time when we got lost in a large cañon and turned to go out of it. The lovely pictures those large and sky piercing rocks on either side of the cañon made is vividly impressed on my memory to this day and I think always will be. How often I wished for pencil and paper while on that trip. God only knows. Even while suffering extremely with the cold should some magnificent scene suddenly burst upon my vision the desire to transfer it to paper was so great that I could almost have cried to think totally unable I was to do it. It seems to me that there is no one in the world who sees so much that is beautiful in nature and has the power of appreciating it as well as I do. Things look beautiful to me. I think that look decidedly common place and ugly in other eyes. For instance we were going along one day when suddenly coming out on the open prairie from behind some foot hills, magnificent snow capped mountains presented themselves to our view; I says to one of my comrades "Just look at those beautiful mountains, ain't they lovely?" "Humph" he grunted, "I can't see anything so very pretty about them" – Now wasn't that a sort of a dash of cold water over my enthusiasm. I fully believe however that I was right, the mountains were beautiful but my friend failed to see where the beauty came in for the simple reason that he didn't appreciate a taste for that which is beautiful in nature. How often have I longed for a companion with whom I could converse with and discuss with reason certain points of beauty in scene that I have had the pleasure to witness.

However I have found that men who can appreciate and talk sensibly about the beautiful scenery of this sunny country are very scarce indeed. Only two or three time have I seen everybody in the vicinity interested in beautiful scenes and that was in Wingate when on a few occasions the magnificent sunsets held spell bound the whole garrison. Indeed so beautiful were those gorgeous sunsets that of the hundred of people who turned out to look at them not one could be heard to speak above the whispers so enchanted were they with the beautiful sight.

I think I have written enough for once and as I don't intend to mail this until after we are paid I think I will give you a no doubt much needed rest and rest home.

Ft. Craig Mch 1st

March ushered itself in with a bright but rather windy day. Have been walking all around the post today selecting a favorite spot from which to get a good view of it so that I can draw a picture of it when I get the drawing paper you said you would send me. I cannot recopy one of my photos as you wished me to do for I have none of them here but promise you I will try to when I get back to Wingate. Please let me know when you write, the size of Mary's scrap book. I believe she said she had one the size of the one she sent me and as I left mine in Wingate I don't know exactly the size of it.

Perhaps I will draw some pictures this summer and I would like to have them a convenient size for the scrap book. If you send me any drawing paper please send as large sheets as you can get and be careful and wrap it up so it will not get crushed in the mail.

A queer and somewhat eccentric individual who dresses and looks somewhat like the miniature [sic] above resides here in Craig, and hold the dignified and time honored position of Post Sutler. This remarkable and somewhat notorious individual goes by the name of Capt. Jack Crawford. He has been a scout and guide for many years in the West but owing to the diminished demand for men of his profession he has given up the scouting business and following in the footsteps of the notorious and far famed "Buffalo Bill" he will take to the stage and hereafter endeavor to delight and interest the appreciative public. He first performance will be given in San Marchial [sic], which is about five miles from here to night, and I think I will go down and witness the gentleman's first appearance in public.

Mch. 4th

I suppose Father is happy to day. I fact it must be a day of great rejoicing for all good Democrats, but then after all I don't think that the change in administration will make any material difference in the welfare of the people in general. Of course people holding political positions like Mr. Overbauch for instance will be seriously affected but they being in the minority their downfall will be of little consequence. I don't think that the change will affect the Army much. At least I hope it will not unless it is beneficially [sic]. What do you think I am driving at now? You would be surprised no doubt if I told you I was Post Carpenter but such is a fact nevertheless. Ha! Ha! But I am a dandy carpenter; you should just see some of the elegant work that I turn out.

At present I am making a bed stand for the Commanding Officer and you bet it's a daisy. One thing he need never be afraid of and that is its breaking down for I have made it so strong that two or three like Uncle Jack Lorreyson would have no effect on it.

By the way, speaking of Uncle Jack, what in the world has become of him anyhow? I haven't had his name mentioned to me since I left Martinsburg. I don't believe I did not go to see Capt. Jack Crawford play as I intended to. The other fellows wouldn't go because they had not the necessary "collar" where with to make a wight [sic] of it and I did not care to go alone.

We see lots of Mexicans around here and I have "chinned" so much with them that I can "spout" a little of their outlandish dialect. You should hear us fellows slinging Mexicans at each other. You would think we were

genuine Spaniards. The great trouble is I forget it almost as fast as I pick it up, the only way I can get the drop on a word is to put it down in my vocabulary and keep repeating it over and over until I have it where it won't get away very easy. The great difficulty with an American is that is found to say things just contrary to the right way to speak their language. They say things just opposite from the way we say it. For instance they say Rio Grande, which literally means River Big, while of course we would say Big River and think we were right and that to say it any other way would be entirely wrong. They put their adjective after the noun, naming a thing before they describe it while we do just exactly the reverse.

Ft. Craig is a fortified fort and judging from its position I should think that a few companies of soldiers would stand off all the Indians and Mexicans in the Territory. If I succeed in drawing a good picture of it I will send it home. I think I will make me an easel so as to be ready to go to work when the paper comes.

Do you know Mother that the greatest difficult I have in my attempts at drawing is the securing of good paper on which to do it. Never since I left the States have I had the right quality of drawing paper and as it is very evident that that is the most import thing I could have it stands to reason that good work could scarcely be done without it. I have often thought about the time when I went to the 3rd Ward school in Bloomington. I used to do work there that far surpassed that of my supposed to be instructor and now look at the difference in our positions. She is getting perhaps over a thousand dollars a year and I am getting about a hundred and fifty. The last letter I ever got from Bloomington stated that William Butler, one of my old schoolmates, was getting a good salary as a draughtsman and I am quite sure that he was far my inferior in the art of drawing at the time I went to school with him. I guess I must have been born on an unlucky day or perhaps I have not the necessary push and enterprise that I should have to make anything a success. However two years and five months from now I will give myself a thorough trial (should I live to see that date) and see what there is in me. It will be either make or break and if it is the latter why it wont make much difference to me for I haven often seen that way.

I think I have written about as much in this letter as any ordinary mortal would attempt to read. Whether I have said anything or not I am unable to say but all I know is that if you survive to read it all there can be no doubt of your good health at present.

I move that you all take a turn at reading this and when one gets tired, let him or her pass it to another. At that note you won't be so near dead as if you attempted to read it all yourself. Well I guess I will just pone until we get paid which I suppose will be in a day or two.

Ft. Craig, N.M. Mch. 10th

Dear Mother.

We were paid to day and as soon as I get my checks cashed I will remit you \$21 – the \$1 is to get me some drawing paper and pencils with. If you can get me a good arithmetic I wish you would send me one as I would like to study some this summer. I will write to Mary soon. This leaves me enjoying excellent health and in splendid condition to appreciate the lovely weather we are having now.

I hope you are all well and enjoying life as well as I am at the present. Although I am somewhat lonesome at time. Would like to hear from you if you feel like writing after reading this terrible letter.

As Ever Your loving Son,
Clarence Chrisman