Famous Fugitives of Fort Union

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Opening Ceremonies for
State Highway Route 477 and
The National Monument Which it Will Serve

Fort Union

Climaxing thirty years of efforts to preserve one of the Southwest's outstanding historic sites.

June 8, 1956
10:30 a.m.

Program

Ross E. Thompson, President of Fort Union, Inc.
master of ceremonies

Hon. Edwin L. Mechem, former governor, State of New Mexico
who sanctioned and helped organize Fort Union, Inc.

Andrew Marshall, Jr., Secretary, Union Land and Grazing Co.
representing the former owners of the Fort Union site who donated the lands on which the fort is built, thus doing much to make the establishment of the monument possible.

T. J. Heiman, Chairman, New Mexico State Highway Commission
representing the Commission.

Hugh M. Miller, Regional Director, National Park Service
representing the Park Service.

Hon. John F. Sims, Jr., Governor of the State of New Mexico
who will cut the ribbon, officially opening the highway to Fort Union.

Immediately following the ceremonies guests and visitors may, if they wish, make a tour through the Fort Union ruins.
FORT UNION in an early day played a prominent part in the defense of New Mexico against Indians and marauders, but its greatest claim to fame was during the Civil War when it saved the country from falling to Texas soldiers. As other forts were taken, the whole issue depended upon holding Fort Union, and it became the main outpost for military maneuvers. From those war years comes a little story of three noted Southerners once held there briefly, whose only crime, to quote Marshal A. C. Hunt, was “they loved their homeland.” These patriots were Green Russell and his brothers, Oliver and Dr. Levi Russell, renowned pioneers of Colorado.

It was in November 1862 that a scouting party of Colorado Volunteers, commanded by Lt. George L. Shoup, apprehended a group of travelers near the Canadian River, apparently headed for Fort Smith, and took them back to Fort Union. A report by Lt. Shoup addressed to Capt. William H. Backus and dated December 1, 1862, now filed among Army records in San Antonio, Texas, gives a detailed account of the capture. It shows that the party was spotted, watched and followed, then captured with the aid of Indians bribed to help.

The Indians, sent to find out if they were traders, the number of their men and kind of arms, were told on no account to mention the soldiers. They returned with a note addressed to the chief of the Comanche Nation, signed Russell and Company, which in substance said they were a party...
of eighteen white men from Las Vegas, New Mexico, bound for Fort Smith.

The soldiers and Indians, now quite a number, were at a point on the Canadian River described as "about 250 miles below the mouth of Utah Creek." Here bluffs furnished an admirable place for concealing the men, as well as for pouncing upon these hapless travelers who, prepared for Indian negotiations, never suspected the presence of soldiers. Most of those arrested were trying to reach their homes in Georgia. They surrendered quietly, gave up their arms and possessions, and went peaceably with their captors. In his report, Lt. Shoup said of them: "The general conduct and behaviour of the prisoners after their capture was that of high-toned gentlemen. They made no attempt to escape. They all say that they had no intention of joining the Confederate Army, though the majority of them acknowledge that their sympathies are with the South."

The captives were searched, their papers and treasure of gold dust taken, but watches, chains and rings they were allowed to keep. Other possessions confiscated consisted, according to the official report, of "six double barreled shot guns, eight rifles, six revolvers, ten mules, ten horses, ten sets of harness, ten briddles, ten saddles, one side-saddle and five wagons." These effects sent to Santa Fe were acknowledged later by Major H. D. Whalen in a letter addressed to Capt. Plympton, commander of Fort Union: "I enclose you receipts for the Green Russell party from the depository for gold dust; from Capt. McFerran for animals and wagons; and from the Commanding Officer Ft. Marcy, for arms, etc. I will thank you to hand them to the parties interested."

Not much seems to be known generally about the capture of this party, nor its subsequent release a few months later, although five of those detained had been members of the famed Russell party of prospectors who in 1858 found gold on Cherry Creek in Colorado, and established the first town-site of what is now Denver, calling it Auraria after a gold town in Georgia near the Russells' home. The five members of this group held captive at Fort Union in 1862 were the brothers, Green, Oliver, and Dr. L. J. Russell, their cousin

The original Russell party of prospectors along Cherry Creek had numbered thirteen, and it was their discoveries in 1858 that inadvertently started a gold rush which opened up Colorado both to fortune hunters, and home seekers alike. Every book on Colorado history, and even some guide books tell the story, often showing a picture of the leader, Green Russell. The favorite one taken from an old crayon likeness shows a most unusual "beard-do," for unlike his contemporaries whose generous beards fluttered in the breeze, Green's was worn in two neat braids stuck in his shirt front! At one time the name of Green Russell was blazoned forth in every press over the country. The exploits of his party are too well known to be told again here, but the Fort Union experience of these five men is little known, and can bear repeating. How did they come to be in this part of the country at this time, and why were they apprehended in Union territory as southern sympathizers?

James Pierce, one of the group, gave a vivid account some years afterward which appeared still later in a Colorado publication, The Trail, of May 1921. Pierce's version was quite different from Lt. Shoup's who was trying, it seems, to justify his use of Comanche Indians in tracking down travelers! Also, according to Pierce, Shoup's troop was made up in Colorado around Central City where most of the men had known the Russells, several had even worked for them in Russell Gulch. Pierce says Shoup "felt badly" over the Indian arrangement when he found out these were respected pioneers of Colorado, well known to his men.

Although Pierce's recollection of the capture is told graphically, the story as handed down in the Russell family is meager. Fort Union is named as the place of their detention, but little was said of their imprisonment or release, except it was brought about by influence of friends. Now,
nearly a century later, a granddaughter of Oliver Russell, in writing this article, and sharing what she has gathered, hopes it will elicit more information, both of the Russells and of Fort Union.

The Russells, a family of English descent, had lived in Georgia near Dahlonega, and the three brothers who were later to prospect in the West grew up in a mining district that had been the scene of the first gold rush in the United States. In 1828, the same year Oliver was born, gold was found three miles south of Dahlonega. Thirty years later Oliver and his brothers were to discover gold in the Rockies, and that was the year his eldest son, Dick, was born, an important date in the family annals.

Nearly a decade earlier before the Colorado discoveries, Green Russell, an experienced miner, had gone to California with another brother, John. That was in 1849. The next year he returned with the two younger brothers, Oliver and Levi, who were later to share his Colorado ventures. The three did well in California, returning to Georgia with substantial amounts of gold. It is hinted that Green on his earlier trips across plains and mountains might even have stumbled on to promising ore, for he firmly believed from then on that Colorado was a gold country, a belief which his later finds justified.

After the Cherry Creek discoveries in the summer of 1858, Green and Oliver had gone back to Georgia for men and supplies, leaving Dr. Levi Russell to hold their claims and erect a cabin, the first, in what was to be Auraria. Returning in the spring of 1859 the first news to greet them was of Gregory’s strike up Clear Creek a few days earlier. It was not long before the Russells, too, made a successful discovery there near Gregory’s, a few miles from the place that Central City would occupy. In a short time over nine hundred miners were working there in Russell Gulch, panning more than $35,000 of “dust” a week.

Many other ventures were undertaken the next few years by the Russell brothers. The most ambitious one was the construction of a large ditch to bring in water for mining operations from Fall River twelve miles away. On account of
conflicting water rights, their company united with another concern, to become the Consolidated Ditch Company of which Green Russell was president. In about a year, at a cost of over $100,000, the ditch was completed, and proved a great success.

In the meantime war clouds were gathering, tempers flared, and men in all parts of the country were taking sides, even as far away as Russell Gulch. As the situation grew more tense, the Southerners found themselves outnumbered by Union sympathizers. Even though they were peace loving, respected men in the community, it did not save them from the work of a rabble that cut their flumes at night and molested them generally. At one time it was necessary for the Marshal of the Territory, A. C. Hunt, to intervene in their behalf.

For all their activities in Colorado, the brothers had never brought their families out of Georgia, but had made several trips back and forth to visit them. When hostilities started and Georgia was in the thick of things, the Southerners found they were cut off from home, with things getting ever harder for them in Colorado. Early in 1862 Green Russell told James Pierce, his cousin, that they could no longer stand the insults that were being heaped upon them, and had decided to try getting back to their native state. Planning together a party of eighteen, including five of the original pioneers, they made up an outfit in Denver and in the guise of prospectors set out over the mountains to Georgia Bar on the Arkansas. From there the route taken lay through San Luis Valley to Fort Garland, on to Taos and Mora, and then Las Vegas. Their hope was to pick up the Santa Fe and Fort Smith road about twenty-five miles south of Las Vegas, which was an open line into Texas, called “the back door of the Confederacy.”

Shoup’s men were in the vicinity, but had gone down the Pecos, so the travelers reached the Canadian in safety, and might have succeeded in getting through had not a greater misfortune befallen them. At Taos, according to Pierce’s account, they had allowed Ike Roberts to join the party. Though known as a somewhat doubtful character, he said he
was broke, and begged to go along. Objections were stifled and he was taken into the Witcher wagon, but they paid dearly for this kindness. In about four days Roberts came down with smallpox, most dreaded disease, that soon spread until half the company was afflicted. They were fortunate in having Dr. Russell to take care of the sick, although he had no vaccine and could only treat the cases after they developed. Several deaths occurred and the dead were buried on the plains. About this time they had fallen into Shoup’s hands, and all but the extremely ill were taken on to Fort Union.

Among the smallpox victims was Mr. Potts, father of the six children, whose wife had died the year before in Colorado. Mr. Potts’ body was buried before they reached Fort Union, and it was discovered that all the family’s money had been buried with him as well. This left the children destitute, but they were shown great kindness at the Fort, and a purse of several hundred dollars was made up for them. The eldest girl, Martha, also received a proposal of marriage from Mr. Patterson, one of the party, which she accepted, and after their release went with him to settle in Huerfano County. Stories like this were best remembered later, for they were told again and again.

The Russells were held prisoners from their arrest November 4, 1862, until the release February 14, 1863, but the four months spent seemed to have been relatively pleasant ones. James Pierce said that a few days after their arrival they were put on parole of honor and allowed to go anywhere they chose within four miles of the fort. Their rations were good, they were in good, comfortable quarters. There were no charges against them, and they were considered political prisoners, not prisoners of war. This, however, gave them no chance to be exchanged or dismissed except at the will and pleasure of the government officially, so they did not know how or when their release would come. They received the kindest treatment from officers and men alike. Pierce praised Gen. James H. Carleton, Commander of the Department, particularly, who made a re-question of facts which was written out by the prisoners and forwarded to the War Department for instructions.
When the answer came that the General was to exercise his own judgment and do as he saw fit, both with the men and their effects, he immediately sent the conditions to the officers of Fort Union. If the prisoners would take the oath of allegiance to the United States they would be released, with their money and effects all restored to them; otherwise they would be held until the war closed. The terms were accepted gladly, and they were released at once. Such was Pierce's version of what he understood took place, but it may not have been as simple as Pierce recalls it. There is usually pressure needed to budge red tape, and make things move. Smiley, in his comprehensive History of Denver, telling of the capture and release, credits Marshal Hunt with befriending them and says: "Supported by the intercession and influence of the Russell brothers' Denver friends, who were certainly not of Confederate sympathies, (he) went to Fort Union, secured the release of the prisoners and had their property restored to them."

There may be other versions that will come to light about this little group of Civil War captives and how they gained their freedom, how they spent those four months at Fort Union, what the fort was like at the time, who were the friends that helped them. Since the prisoners were well thought of, well treated, and not strictly guarded, they could easily have appealed for outside help through men who stopped by the fort, men like Kit Carson, Cerán St. Vrain, and others, as was indicated by Benton Canon's article in the Colorado Magazine about the early settlers of Huerfano County.

Another thought, and one cherished by this writer, is that aid may have come through Masonic influences. Dr. Russell was an active Mason who helped establish December 10, 1858, at Auraria the first lodge in that whole western territory. At the time of their imprisonment, Chapman Lodge had but recently been founded at Fort Union where it was active until moved to Las Vegas in 1866. There has never been any mention of such aid, but it is not unreasonable to imagine that Masons would come to the rescue of their fellow members.
Returning to Pierce's account, he states that all of their possessions were restored to them, including the $20,000 in gold dust that had been sent to Santa Fe and their horses that were on a ranch near Albuquerque, all of which Green and Oliver retrieved. Before they left Fort Union for Denver, a distance of about four hundred miles, the quartermaster, Capt. Bragg, furnished them supplies to last the journey. Col. Allen and Lt. Adkins who had been pioneers of Colorado also, and were now leaving the military service, joined them for part of this trip which took four weeks.

When they were back in Denver again the five original members of the old Georgia party remained together a week or so. Rather plaintively Pierce tells that when they separated it was the last time so many of them were ever to be together again, and said, "We parted near the place where we had camped in 1858." Of the five only two, Green and Oliver, tried again to make it back to Georgia. James Pierce and Dr. Russell went to Montana and Samuel Bates went back into the mountains.

Green and Oliver took the northern route home, and after many hardships and narrow escapes reached their families. That return trip is a story in itself, as is the subsequent history of the Russells. When they got to Georgia, Green equipped a company of soldiers for the Confederacy at his own expense which he commanded, Oliver serving as lieutenant. After the war the brothers all left Georgia and settled in other states.

It may have been the most fortunate thing in the world that the little group, arrested and detained at Fort Union, did not get into the Comanche infested territory of Texas at that time, for the red men were on the war path. They had been told at the fort that they could not have made it. Had the Russells in 1862 crossed the Canadian, they doubtless would never have survived for two of them to return and live out their lives in Texas. Dr. Russell went to Bell County and practiced medicine at Heidenheimer until his death in 1908. Oliver settled in Kimble County and engaged in ranching, later moving to Menard. Here he died October 28, 1906, and
is buried in the old cemetery. Three of his sons and a daughter still survive and live at Menard.

Green was the only one of the Russell brothers who ever returned to Colorado. With another party from Georgia he came in 1872 to Huerfano County, and was active there in ranching and mining, later moving into the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Fort Garland. He made only one more trip to Denver, and that in 1875, in connection with the "Consolidated Ditch" business. A year later he sold all his claims and started back to Georgia, but got no further than the Indian Territory. There he died, August 24, 1877, and was buried at Briartown on the Canadian River.

None of the original Russells seem ever to have come back to New Mexico, but Fort Union was mentioned so often in family recitals that this one venturesome descendant set out last summer [1955] to find the place. It is in ruins, of course, and not accessible to the public, but the search did lead to many happy contacts with New Mexico people anxious to preserve the famous old fort as a national shrine. With its colorful history, its importance as an outpost that turned the tide of our nation's destiny in the West, it is entitled to its place in the sun.

This article, if it serves no other purpose, may stir up memories and bring out stories of the old fort and the people who once were there. Although it is the contribution of one who from infancy was cradled on Confederate glory, whose people fought for a lost cause, the author appreciates that strength came from unity in our land, no longer rent by fratricidal war and sectional prejudices, and hopes old Fort Union may long unite the hearts of those who love that land, particularly in the great Southwest which is such a glorious part of it.