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Review of Sentinel of the Southern Plains: Fort Richardson and the Northwest Texas Frontier, 1866-1878

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Sentinel of the Southern Plains: Fort Richardson and the Northwest Texas Frontier, 1866-1878. By Allen Lee Hamilton. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1988. (Number Five in the Chisholm Trail Series.) Maps, photographs, illustrations, introduction, afterword, notes, bibliography, appendix, index. xviii + 251 pp. \$14.95.

Slightly more than a century ago the dreaded "Comanche Moon" of each month virtually assured devastating Indian raids upon the isolated ranches of Texas' northwestern frontier. No issue raised more ire in the state legislature or produced more animosity between state and federal officials than did this. To protect these exposed settlements, the War Department established a thin line of military posts from the Red River to the Rio Grande. Anchoring the northern zone was Fort Richardson, established in 1866 with a garrison to patrol the upper Brazos River country and to turn back raiding parties of Comanches and Kiowas from the Fort Sill Agency in southwestern Indian Territory. Initial plans for the construction of a well-ordered stone compound gave way to the economic realities of the moment. Instead of emerging from the prairie soil as an invincible fortress, the military post "was a collection of stone, picket, and lumber buildings, scattered over a rectangular area almost a mile long and one-quarter mile wide, that more resembled a small village than a fort" (p. 28). Initial desertion rates averaged 12 percent, a figure that edged even higher during the 1870s as harsh discipline, low pay, and monotony of duty drove soldiers to desperate measures.

Despite the troubled beginnings of Fort Richardson, it presided over some of the most important events in southern plains history and played a major role in permanently confining the Comanches and Kiowas to their reservation. The 1871 arrival of Colonel Ranald S. Mackenzie as commander of the post signaled the initiation of major offensives into the Indian

strongholds of the Staked Plains. Mackenzie's operations during 1871 and 1872, as well as his 1874 victory at Palo Duro Canyon in the Texas Panhandle, stood as models for conducting campaigns against western Indians. Likewise, Fort Richardson's role in the celebrated civil trial of Satanta and Big Tree provided not only a unique constitutional case but also a frontier legend that seemingly eased the public pain of the 1871 Warren Wagon Train Massacre.

Allen Lee Hamilton, currently on the history faculty at San Antonio College and former resident of Jacksboro, where Fort Richardson is located, has written an engaging book which will please most persons interested in Texana, frontier military history, and the story of Indian-white relations. Drawing upon a large and diverse collection of printed and archival materials, Hamilton has captured the essence of microcosmic history by demonstrating how one isolated military post fitted into the broader regional history of the late nineteenth century. Written with accuracy and literary grace, *Sentinel of the Southern Plains* tells us much about the soldiers, their life in garrison and on trail, and the foibles of federal policy. Unfortunately, the book is not as detailed in presenting the Indian viewpoint, nor is it free of ethnocentric and outdated words such as "savages," "hostiles," "braves," and "squaws." The overall story is already familiar to specialists, but it is admirably retold within these pages.

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