

Poor Food, Poor Equipment, Poor Housing, Impossible Task: The Arizona Volunteers in the Verde Valley, 1866

By Stan Brown

The first military presence in the Verde River Valley was sent there to support a small group of civilian settlers who in February of 1865 used material from an ancient Indian pueblo to build a 40 by 60 foot fort for common protection against Apache attack. The settlers also dug an irrigation ditch that brought water from West Clear Creek. It emptied into the Verde River and the ditch became so prominent it also came to be called "Clear Creek."

In that first settlement there were seventeen men, two women, and three children. From the beginning they were harassed by Indian raiders, although the Yavapai and Tonto Apache warriors were not so much interested in killing the settlers as they were in stealing livestock and seasonal crops. Out of fear the little community soon demanded military protection.

They were not alone in their concerns. Nearly all the army units in Arizona had gone to fight in the Civil War and settlers all across the Territory were left vulnerable to Indian raids. Soon after President Lincoln declared Arizona a Territory in February 1864, Governor John N. Goodwin appealed to the War Department for authority to raise companies of volunteer infantry to combat the Indians. That permission was granted in April, but because money was lacking no action was taken until June of 1865. A surveyor and mercantile businessman, Hiram Storrs Washburn, was given the rank of 2nd Lieutenant of Arizona Volunteers and assigned to recruit several units of volunteer infantry. Two months later he was commissioned a Captain.¹

Five Volunteer Companies Formed

Washburn attacked his assignment with enthusiasm, spending his own funds to recruit and maintain the newly forming companies of volunteers. Recruiting continued through the summer of 1865, resulting in formation of

Company A, stationed at Fort Whipple, and two companies stationed at Fort McDowell: Company B, made up of Maricopa Indians, and Company C, made up of Pima Indians. Companies E and F were all Mexican units, some recruited from the mines in Southern Arizona and most recruited from villages in Sonora, Mexico, where the Apaches had staged such devastating raids that the men were eager to fight them on the United States side of the border. Furthermore, a civil war raged in Mexico and many recruits were ready to escape from it.²

In November, after months of waiting, Companies E & F were mustered into Federal service at Ft. Mason, Calabasas, Arizona Territory, along with their leader Captain Hiram Washburn. The French had invaded Mexico, taking advantage of the civil war in Sonora, and were marching north toward the United States. Many in the U.S. feared that the French might try to invade, and Washburn wondered if the delay in ordering his volunteers to fight the Apaches might be to keep them on the Mexican border. In a letter to the governor in August Washburn stated that his Mexican recruits "are in my judgment equal if not superior to any others for Apache campaigning, and next they would be most desirable auxiliaries in checking French aspirations and intentions which have progressed as far as Hermosillo with nothing to obstruct their progress... It has long been

openly asserted among the Mexicans that the French intend as soon as they have put down all opposition in Sonora to cross the line and capture all the country ceded to the U.S. by Santa Ana... I do not think there are any enlisting with me who would refuse or be opposed to crossing the line and help restore Sonora to the Republic, but what we want first is to whip the Apaches and restore our own Arizona to that condition wherein emigrants and capitalists of all professions can come here and mine, manufacture, and cultivate the soil in security.”³

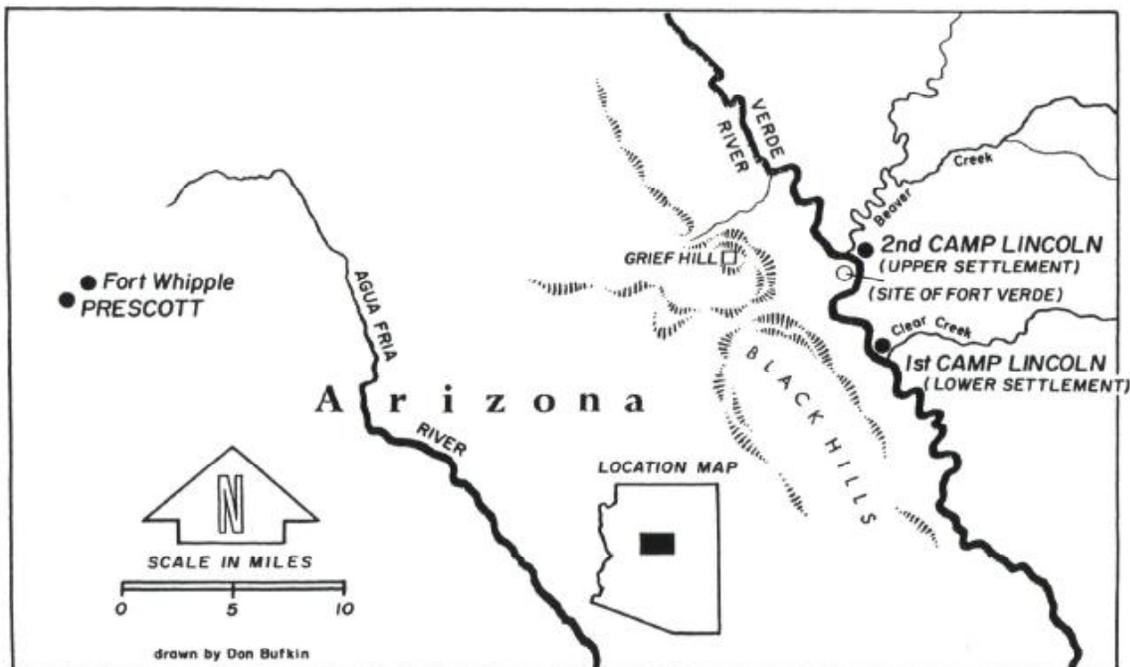
Companies E and F Move to Ft. Whipple

Throughout the fall of 1865 Captain Washburn wrote letter after letter to the governor pleading for shoes, clothing, blankets and guns for his units, and orders to put them into action against the Apaches. For the one hundred men he had only four axes, two spades, and six mess pans as the only cooking utensils. From the Territorial Capital in Prescott the governor seemed unable to do anything. At last, on December 4th they received orders to march north to Fort Whipple. It was a gruesome march in winter

weather, during which two men died and the rest suffered greatly. It took them the entire month to reach Fort Whipple, where they did not find much to comfort them. Washburn wrote in his report “the cold was extreme, no quarters for the men, whose condition was truly pitiable. They bore all patiently and manfully...”⁴

First Soldiers Reach the Verde Valley

Meanwhile, in August 1865, the Verde Valley settlers received the only military unit available, a detachment from Company K of the 1st New Mexico Cavalry, under the command of Antonio Abeytia. They were dispatched from Fort Whipple, and “upon reaching the mountain top overlooking the valley,” Abeytia wrote in his report, “(we) had not descended it one hundred yards when the transportation wagon broke down scattering contents some 600 yards down into a canyon... Suddenly the Indians, about 300 warriors armed with rifles, bow and arrows, made their appearance immediately above where the wagon broke down... There were only three men near the wagon... Before the others could reach them the Indians had burnt



up everything except some muster rolls...”⁵

Grief Hill Earns its Name

After that this primitive descent into the Verde Valley came to be called “Grief Hill. The “grief” came not only from Indian attacks, but from the fact that wagons had to be unloaded and lowered by block and tackle, while the contents were packed by men and mule to the bottom.

The detachment set up a tent camp in the flat area near the stone “fort” the farmers had built for protection. No buildings were constructed by the army at this location, and references to the site would be simply “Rio Verde,” or “the lower camp on the Clear Creek of the Rio Verde.” By September the settler’s corn crop was drawing Indian raids on the fields. In one report of the commanding officer Abeytia, he wrote that on September 11th “the Indians made another raid, taking some sixty bushels of corn and destroying a large quantity of it. There was [sic] at least 150 to 200 Indians in the cornfields that night. I most respectfully state that the Indians are quite numerous here and I look for them at any moment to get the herd and probably attack the camp...”⁶

The small unit of cavalry felt totally inadequate to protect the farmers. Abeytia reported in October, “Engaged the hostile Tonto Apaches in the valley of the Rio Verde. Five Indians were killed and the balance routed. We lost two company horses, killed, and two more wounded.”⁷

In October the Rio Verde camp was bolstered by the arrival from Ft. Whipple of Company A, 1st Infantry Arizona Volunteers, under the command of Lt. Primitivo Cervantes. With them was Dr. Edward Palmer, the medical officer assigned to the post, and whose notes would become one of the most valuable records of life there.⁸ He described the

harrowing descent over Grief Hill, some one and a half miles. It was night and so some of his personal articles had to be left at the top until morning. “The Apaches had watched our movements... At an early hour a detachment was sent but found only ashes. My keg of whiskey and alcohol was one of my greatest anxieties... I had a five gallon keg of whiskey with two quarts of alcohol added for the preservation of specimens.” Palmer would gather many specimens of flora and fauna during his time at Camp Lincoln, and send them back to Washington with his notes from this strange new land. “On moving (the whiskey and alcohol) into camp, I took two pounds of arsenic, and taking a position so that all could see, put it in the keg of whiskey. One anxious voice called out, ‘Doctor, what’s that you put in?’ Arsenic, I replied. Then said he, ‘My free drinks are ended; I had three yesterday.’” Then Palmer added, “The key could now be left; science and specimens made (the whiskey) safe.”

Camp Lincoln Gets its Name

In December a company of the 4th California Volunteer Infantry, commanded by Major Henry M. Benson, was temporarily in the field at Rio Verde, and their officers began calling the post Camp Lincoln. At their request General John Mason issued General Order #16 that “the camp on the Rio Verde, in honor of our late lamented Chief Magistrate, will hereafter be known as Camp Lincoln.” In an aside to his officers General Mason said he wanted “the Copperheads among the local settlers to owe their protection to a post bearing a name they abused.”⁹

In January 1866, Company E received good news. Their company muster rolls reads, “Received orders ... to move Company to Camp Lincoln, which was effected through much snow and rain ... distance 60 miles.”¹⁰ It took them two weeks to complete the march from Fort Whipple because of the weather.

As reported in Dr. Palmer's notes, the entire first week of January was very wet, the nights filled with wind and heavy thunder storms. On the 10th of January it rained all day, and on the 15th there was a frost. When Company E did arrive at the camp on the 16th, "some had their feet tied up in rags... The condition of these men was wretched beyond description."

While Company E was on the way, the command at Camp Lincoln had moved the post six miles up the Verde River to the confluence of Beaver Creek. As I walked this site with Camp Verde Park Ranger Bob Munson, I asked why they had moved the camp. He responded, "My supposition is there were two civilian settlements in the valley, but that all records of one have been lost. They put this site where it is to be between the two settlements."¹¹ However, another reason also emerged while we walked the original site of the Rio Verde Camp at West Clear Creek; we encountered a government employee trapping mosquitoes. He said there was much malaria on the military posts of Arizona because they were usually established at the confluence of streams to assure adequate water. This also assured more mosquitoes. In the four months the detachments were camped at Clear Creek this menace became evident. The new location above Beaver Creek was high on a bluff overlooking the river.

During their early weeks in the camp Company E was busy "doing Garrison duty and building quarters for themselves."¹² Company E was not permitted to build permanent housing because Captain Washburn was eager for his men to get into the field and hunt Apaches. His plan was that they should never become comfortable in permanent buildings. He would keep them constantly on the move after the enemy, returning to the post only to refit their unit. The troops lived in brush shelters, or in

handmade caves dug out of the side of the steep bluff overlooking the river. Also living in these dugouts were the laundresses, who provided other services for the troops as well.

On January 31st the California Volunteers left, and Captain Washburn took command of Camp Lincoln with his two Companies of Arizona Volunteers. The two companies were mostly Mexicans, with a few whites and Indians. Dr. Palmer said that the Indians in Company A belonged "to tribes in Arizona and Mexico ... three Apaches among them. They had been taken prisoners by Mexicans when children and brought up away from their tribe, and were as fierce to hunt Apaches as any."¹³ These two companies of Arizona Volunteers engaged in electrifying encounters from January to August 1866. Their intense action against the Indians was directed primarily at the Tonto Apaches whose home territory lay just over the Mogollon Rim to the east. Several years earlier Territorial Judge Joseph Pratt Allyn had observed the effectiveness of Mexican soldiers and wrote "One of them is worth two American soldiers."¹⁴

Mexican Volunteers Earn Plaudits

The press, the Territorial Legislature, and the governor echoed this assessment of the Mexican volunteers when Company E reported victories against the Apaches. Journalists were quick to say they had earned a proud name, and that these Mexican volunteers did more to clear the way for settlement than all the regular army troops in the Territory.

After several fruitless scouting expeditions, the most famous victory for Company E came about the middle of February 1866. Beaver Creek is one of several major streams flowing west from the Black Mesa (as the Indians dubbed the Mogollon Rim), and each of these streams formed a canyon that became a

ladder-way between the Verde Valley and the rugged mountain hideouts of the Apaches. On February 11, second in command Lt. Manuel Gallegos led a party of 45 men, including the post surgeon Dr. Palmer, along Beaver Creek. They had rations for five days; each man carried a canteen of water and one blanket, which was his bed at night and knapsack by day. They followed the canyon into the mountains, exploring its side canyons for Apache camps and its divides for signal fires. During the day they hid in the ravines, and marched at night. On the evening of February 13, advance scouts returned with exciting news. They had found an Indian camp, and had gone close enough to see fires and plan for an attack. They rested throughout the next day, and the next night marched over the maze of canyons and rough volcanic rock, the Company's hand-made moccasins enabling them to move quietly.¹⁵ Palmer wrote, "Just before day dawned we arrived at the edge of what the moonlight showed to be a very steep and rough descent to a stream of water, and there were fires distinctly seen."

A Dawn Attack

The Tonto Apache families were living in five natural caves in the canyon walls. Lt. Gallegos divided the command to attack at dawn from different directions. At his command the air was filled with gunfire and arrows and shouting. The soldiers aimed their rifles into the caves so that the bullets would ricochet off ceilings and walls to strike the Indian families behind their fortifications. The soldiers could hear screams, yells and moaning coming from the caves as they continued their volleys. At one point Gallegos called out in Apache for them to surrender, but the Tontos yelled back that they would rather die, which they did.

The muster rolls of Company E reported the action simply, "At 6 o'clock in the morning of

the 13th, attacked an Apache Rancheria inhabiting five caves, hence called the battle of 'Cinco Cuevos.' Battle lasted three hours, result thirty Indians killed and twelve prisoners; wounded unknown. Loss sustained, none killed, six wounded and one badly bruised by stones from the enemy."

Dr. Palmer wrote that "the caves presented a horrible sight, as dead of all ages and sexes, with household goods and provisions, lay mixed with the dirt from the caves brought down by firing of the guns, while the blood of the dead freely mixed with all."

The soldiers, apparently not overwhelmed by the sight, plundered goods and buckskins. They marched back to Camp Lincoln with their prisoners, arriving on February 15. It was a gala moment for those who waited, and their monotony was broken by singing and joyful shouts. A procession of women went out to meet the returning heroes, carrying a picture of Mexico's patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe. Dr. Palmer relates that the women were "the soldier's mistresses and wives, mostly prostitutes living promiscuously among the soldiers." There were sixteen women among the one hundred twenty or more soldiers. That this ratio did not create conflict in the camp is probably attributable to the fact the men were seldom there.

The twelve Apache prisoners from the Battle of the Caves included two grown women and ten children. That afternoon one of the children died from a wound he had sustained and the rigors of the march. These Catholic women baptized the dead child along with the other captured children, and then held a funeral service as best they could remember their prayers. They covered the child's body with wildflowers, which were flourishing in the Verde Valley's early spring weather, and carried the body to a secret place, chanting

hymns of faith. The location had to be secret because the women learned that Dr. Palmer wanted the child's body for "a specimen." He was infuriated that they prevented him from taking the body, and he vented his frustration by writing sarcastically about the Catholic faith. Palmer exclaimed, "What a farce! If they understood the meaning it would be different, and those who prayed in habits were but little better than the Indians. They were mostly prostitutes living promiscuously among the soldiers." Somehow the attributes of faith and compassion escaped him.

The Battle of the Five Caves was heralded as a great victory for the settlers in Arizona's Indian war. Lt. Gallegos and his company were praised in the newspapers, by the governor, and by the Territorial Legislature. A letter in the *San Francisco Bulletin*, March 6, 1866, Gallegos and Company E drew plaudits, though the name of the lieutenant was apparently not known, "This truly meritorious officer, who in one scout, while his men were without shoes, and living on half rations, killed more Indians in three hours than all the other officers in the Territory have killed in the past year."

Sickness and Hunger at Camp Lincoln

The spring and summer of 1866 at Camp Lincoln found the rag-tag army of volunteers suffering from sickness, lack of decent food, a riot over inadequate rations, and the deaths of several men during Apache encroachments on the camp. Their spirits were lifted by a hilarious wedding between the widow of one of the soldiers killed and the highest bidder chosen from the suitors by Captain Washburn. However, the month of March was hand-to-mouth with small contingents of thirty men plying the trail to Ft. Whipple for provisions, as they were available.¹⁶ During this time Washburn and his troops punched a new road out of the Verde Valley up Copper Canyon, avoiding the incredibly difficult Grief Hill.

This helped speed the delivery of supplies.

More Raids into Apacheria

Of the many forays taken by the soldiers from Camp Lincoln, few yielded decisive results. However, in March, Cervantes and his Company A located a Rancheria somewhere on upper Tonto Creek. The battle lasted thirty minutes; 22 Apaches were killed, eight escaped, two children were taken prisoner, and the village was destroyed. Two soldiers received arrow wounds.¹⁷ Prescott's *Arizona Miner* couldn't say enough good things about this "glorious victory." The newspaper outlined the noble marches in search of Apache camps, praised the volunteer's humility for doing it with so little fanfare, and boldly suggested that the regular troops should take notice.

Lack of supplies and inclement weather kept the infantry out of action much of the spring. The March-April Muster Roll for Company E read, "Very little has been attempted these two months for want of provisions. No flour since the 20th of April. No coffee, sugar nor salt except brine salt for over a month."

Supply trains from Whipple were attacked by the Indians, and sometimes the wagons were burned and cattle were driven off. Day after day the company detachments went out hunting for Indians with only occasional success. The famous civilian scout Paulino Weaver was enlisted to lead on one occasion, and going up the Verde River they came upon "a rancheria of twenty six lodges, the occupants all fleeing into the mountain at the approach of my small party..."¹⁸

Discovery of Tonto Natural Bridge

On one scouting expedition in July, Gallegos and his company discovered a small family settlement of Tonto Apaches at the natural wonder known today as Tonto Natural Bridge.¹⁹ The Indians fled, but one old man

was taken prisoner and brought back to Camp Lincoln. Dr. Palmer recounts the fate of the old fellow. "For a long time the paymaster had been expected at Camp Lincoln, so as the scout returned they palmed off the prisoner as the paymaster that had been looked for, for so long a time. These troops had not been paid since they entered the army. Many had come to the conclusion they would get nothing for their service... As no paymaster came through, in spite of plenty of promises, the soldiers concluded that this poor dried up old Indian, without a tooth and almost naked, was as good a paymaster as they would see. By that name he was called as long as he was in Camp. He was allowed his freedom about the Camp by day, as he was quite lame, but at night he had to sleep in the guardhouse.

"One morning he was missing. Search was made. He was said to be found in a ravine. As he was nearly blind, as well as lame, he missed the footpath and as he reached the ravine fell in and so injured himself that he must soon die. They having no means to remove him to Camp... the discharge from a rifle was thought to be the best and most charitable way of ending his extreme sufferings."²⁰

As the summer monsoon pelted Camp Lincoln, Gallegos became sick and bedfast. The Indians were stealing grain from the Clear Creek settlement, and attempts to track down the raiders were without success. Morale was disintegrating daily, and the expiration of the volunteer's one-year enlistment was rapidly approaching. On August 1 Governor McCormick visited Camp Lincoln to express to the volunteers the appreciation of the Territory. His presence only underlined the empty promises of the government. On August 3 the term of service expired for 55 men in Company E, and they refused to continue their duty. The Company's Muster Roll reads, "There being

no force to compel further service, they and all the others as fast as their terms of service expired, were ordered into Ft. Whipple to be discharged and paid off." Actually this took some time.

Volunteer Enlistments End

Washburn went to Ft. Whipple to single-handedly fill out the necessary discharge papers, which he had printed at his own expense. Back at Camp Lincoln, Dr. Palmer had his hands full with soldiers claiming to be sick. Sixty men at a time were lined up outside his dispensary, reporting several types of fever that plagued the Camp from the beginning. The captain returned to Camp Lincoln on August 7, and ordered all enlisted men whose term of service had expired, or would before August 11, to report to Ft. Whipple. He then went ahead of his men and for two weeks worked to cut red tape, getting his men paid and on their way. By August 24 Washburn had seen to it that 84 men of Company E and 29 men of Company A were "mustered out of the service and paid off."²¹

The next day Washburn returned to an empty and bedraggled Camp Lincoln. Lt. Gallegos had gone to Ft. Whipple "for medical relief." Dr. Palmer was still on duty, along with guide Paulino Weaver. Four privates and a sergeant in Company A as well as three privates and one corporal of Company E were left because they had enlisted later than the others.

Indians Harvest Settlers' Corn

Washburn's warning to headquarters over the previous months had become reality. He wrote Col. W. H. Garvin on September 12, "The Indians are now harvesting the corn at this settlement at the rate of about 30 to 40 bushels nightly. There is but one soldier left who is able to shoulder a musket, and he has charge of the Commissary stores at this camp, what there are; no meat left. When the bearer of this leaves, there will be two citizens left

who call themselves well. I am hourly expecting an attempt to take the stock. I have to do guard duty day and night. If assistance does not come very soon, I shall have to abandon what government property I am trying to protect, and shall seek security for myself and animals.”²²

This plain talk seemed to work, and on September 23rd, Company C, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry was ordered to Camp Lincoln. Washburn and Manuel Gallegos and the few enlisted men remaining were there to help orient the new company, and at the end of October were ordered to Ft. Whipple to be mustered out.

On November 23rd, 1866, an official order changed the post’s name from Camp Lincoln to Camp Verde. Action by the regular army against the elusive Apaches continued, but the saga of the Arizona Volunteers in the Verde Valley was over.



NOTES

¹ Washburn was a native of Virginia and had come to Arizona to become a partner in a Tucson business. Until this position was given him, he surveyed mine properties for developers such as the Poston brother, Rafael Pumpelly, Samuel Heintzelman, and Sylvester Mowry. See Washburn biographical file in Arizona Historical Society library, Tucson, and *Pumpelly’s Arizona* edited by Andrew Wallace (Palo Verde Press, Tucson, 1965), those chapters concerning America’s Southwest, taken from Pumpelly’s *Across America and Asia*.

² After the hue and cry from white settlers about the Indian menace, very few European-Americans were willing to sign up for the volunteer regiments. It was easier to use the natural enemies of the Apaches, who were Mexicans and the so-called “friendly Indians” of the Pima and Maricopa tribes.

³ Hayden Files, Arizona Historical Society Library, Tucson, “Hirum Washburn” collection.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ From the special collection of documents by Dr. B. Sacks, to be found in the Fort Verde Museum, Camp Verde Arizona. Hereafter called “Sacks Collection.”

⁶ Reports by Abeytia from the Sacks Collection. Muster Rolls came from the National Archives and Records Administration, General Reference Branch, Washington, D.C., and are in the author’s possession.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Palmer’s handwritten notes at the University of Arizona, Tucson, main library, Special collections. Also *Dr. Palmer’s Experiences With the Arizona Volunteers*,” edited by Lonnie E. Underhill in “Arizona and the West,” Vol. 26, #1, Spring 1984.

⁹ Division of Library, Archives and Public Records, Arizona State Capital, Secretary of the Territory, Box 6.

¹⁰ By today’s roads the distance is ten or more miles shorter.

¹¹ Oral history recorded by Stan Brown, June 16, 1994.

¹² Box 6, letter dated January 25, 1866 from Washburn to acting Governor McCormick. Governor Goodwin had been elected delegate to the U.S. Congress from the Territory in March 1865. At the end of Goodwin’s term, McCormick was appointed governor in his own right.

¹³ *Palmer’s Experiences*, page 51

¹⁴ *The Arizona of Joseph Pratt Allyn: Letters From A Pioneer Judge*, edited by John Nicolson, University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1974, page 53

¹⁵ The Volunteers had not been furnished shoes by the government and so they developed their own footwear, modeled after Apache moccasins.

¹⁶ The Colorado River water was unusually low, so the ships that delivered supplies to Ft. Yuma and Ft. Mohave were delayed. From there supplies had to go overland to the outposts like Ft. Whipple, and then on to Camp Lincoln.

¹⁷ Report of Cervantes to Washburn, March 26. Quoted by Underhill in *A History of The First Arizona Volunteer Infantry*, 1979, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson.

¹⁸ *The Story of Pauline [sic] Weaver* by Jim Byrkit and Bruce Hooper, Sierra Azul Productions, 1993, page 55. Weaver died at Camp Lincoln on June 21st, 1867, the victim of malaria. When the military dead were later removed from Camp Verde to the National Cemetery in San Francisco, Weaver’s body went with them. In the fall of 1928, by popular demand, his remains were returned to Prescott and are interred on the grounds of the Sharlot Hall Museum.

¹⁹ As for any documented discoveries of Tonto Natural Bridge, this is the first time anyone other than Apaches had seen it.

²⁰ *Palmer’s Experiences*, pg 13

²¹ Sacks collection, page 30f

²² Sacks collection, page 32