

Yesterday in Signal Corps

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A Fort Apache Signalman

by Carol E. Rios

Adventure, training, travel—all reasons to join today's Signal Corps. But how was it for a young enlistee in 1879? That was the year that Second Class Private (later Sergeant) Will Croft Barnes enlisted in the Signal Corps (or Signal Service, as it was then known) for a term of five years. Will was a talented man. Throughout his long career he would, at various times, be a soldier, rancher, legislator, forester-conservationist, and fortunately for us, a writer.

In his biography, *Apaches and Longhorns* (University of Arizona Press, 1982), Will gives us a glimpse of the life of a Signalman on the western frontier. Will was no stranger to the west. Born in San Francisco in 1858, he spent his earliest years at Gold Hill, a Nevada mining camp. Nevertheless, he did seem taken aback as he traveled through Tucson, which he described as "a sorry-looking Mexican town," on his train, stagecoach, and pack train journey to his second Signal Service assignment at Fort Apache in the Arizona territory in 1880.

At Fort Apache, Will applied the training he had learned at Fort Whipple (now Fort Myer), Virginia. He signaled with flag, torch, and telegraph and observed and reported the weather to the office of the Chief of Signal in Washington, D.C. Most importantly, during his stay at Fort Apache, Will brought distinction to the Corps.

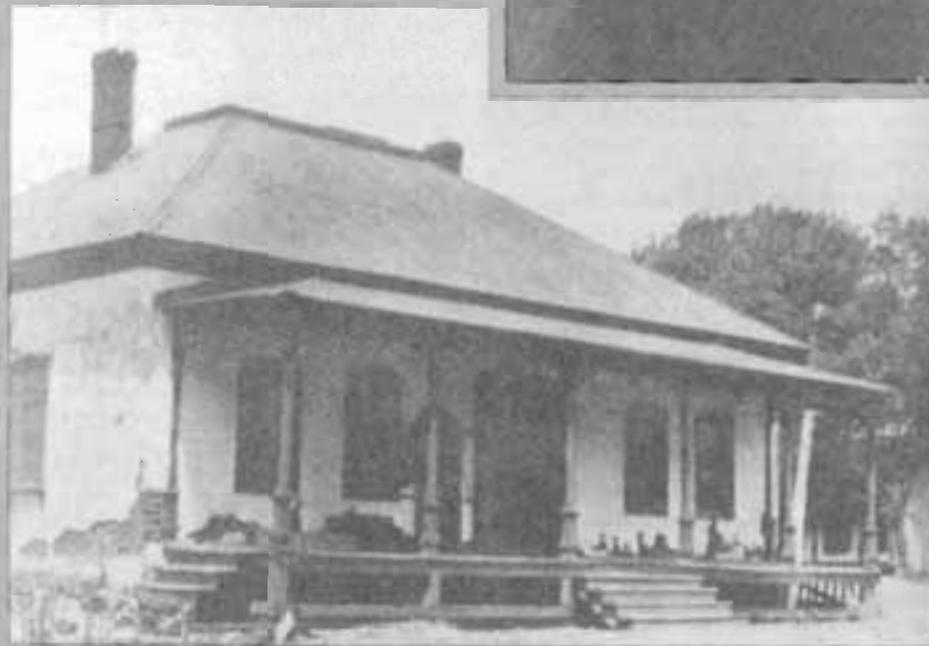
Will relates, in *Apaches and Longhorns*, that Apache restlessness reached a crisis situation in 1881 when a medicine man called "Nock-aye-de-Klinny" began predicting the departure of the white man and the Indians' return to power. Tension increased after Nock-aye-de-Klinny convinced a local tribe that he had a magic shirt impervious to the white man's bullets. On August 29, 1881, Will's commander, General Carr, set out with all 60 of Fort Apache's available troops to capture the troublemaker.

Attempting to quell the fear of imminent Indian attack among those remaining behind at the fort, Will voluntarily climbed a 2,000-foot mesa nearby and used his signal flags to alert the post to Indian movements. Fortunately for them all, Will was soon able to report the return of General Carr's party. They had completed their mission that resulted in the death of Nock-aye-de-Klinny.

It would be sometime, however, before peace was restored at Fort Apache. As the result of his bravery in a skirmish with the Apaches on September 11, 1881, Will Croft Barnes brought lasting recognition to himself and his branch by becoming one of five Signal Corps' members to win the Medal of Honor.

Ms. Rios is a Signal Corps historian at Fort Gordon, Ga.

Private Will C. Barnes, U.S. Signal Corps, 1879 (from Apaches and Longhorns by Will C. Barnes)



The adjutant's office (from Barnes Collection, Arizona Historical Society, courtesy Mrs. George F. Kitt)