

## P. Edward Connor: Protector of the Frontier

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From Irish immigrant to a general in the Volunteer Army, Patrick Edward Connor would find his life to be as colorful as the territories he vowed to protect.

Born on St. Patrick's Day in Ireland in 1820, Patrick emigrated to the United States and at the age of 19 he joined the United States Army. He used his surname of Patrick Edward O'Connor and served in the Seminole Wars which were several conflicts in Florida with the Seminole Indians. Patrick would also see service as a dragoon, a mounted infantryman who would dismount to engage the enemy. He served at several forts including Fort Leavenworth, Fort Atkinson, Fort Sandford and Fort Des Moines. After being honorably discharged as a private after serving five years, he moved back to New York. Two years later, he moved to Texas and on April 5, 1845, he became a naturalized citizen.

Connor's appetite for a military career brought him to join the Texas Volunteers. He served as a first lieutenant under the name, P. Edward Connor in the Texas Foot Riflemen during the Mexican-American War and on July 7, 1846, he was drafted into the United States Army for a stint of twelve months. As he rose in rank to Captain, he fought through heavy action in the Battle of Buena Vista, Mexico where the U. S. Army repelled Mexican forces with constant artillery bombardments. During this battle, Connor was wounded in the hand and honorably discharged on May 24, 1847. Excited by the California Gold rush, he crossed Mexico and into California, arriving on January 22, 1850.

A natural leader, Connor was attempting to establish a new settlement near the mouth of the Trinity River in California. Unaware that the Trinity doesn't reach the Pacific Ocean and actually empties into the Klamath River, he and his party were caught in rough surf in the ocean where five of the ten men in his boat drowned. By this time, Connor was once again tapped for military service. In 1853, Connor joined the California State Rangers with twenty other Mexican-American War veterans. Their mission was to hunt down the Five Joaquins, an outlaw gang made up of five men all with the same first name of Joaquin. From 1850-1853 the Five Joaquins were responsible for stealing over \$100,000 in gold and over 100 horses, killing close to 20 people including 3 lawmen. They had evaded several posses until the governor of California signed a legislative act creating the California Rangers. The Rangers were paid \$150 a month and had the opportunity to share the reward for the gang. At the time, \$150 per month was a hefty sum considering an average miner would make about \$30 a month. Eventually, the Rangers caught up with the Five Joaquins and after a confrontation, two of the gang member and another outlaw known to ride with them, Three-Fingered Jack also killed. Connor and the rest of the Rangers were well rewarded by the state and shortly after, the company disbanded.



*Fort Ruby*

Connor, a man who was in great demand was once again called upon by the State of California to command the Stockton Blues, a unit in the California Militia. Under his command, he brought the unit up to regimental size (up to 2,000 men), becoming the 3<sup>rd</sup> Regiment California Volunteer Infantry. On July 12, 1862, he and his men (about 600), along with 55 wagons, 3 ambulances, several carriages and 2 howitzers, left for his new assignment in the Utah Territory to protect the Overland Stage Routes from Indians and a possible Mormon uprising. Arriving at Fort Ruby in the Nevada Territory on September 1, 1862 he and his men immediately began construction of the fort by gathering stone and timber from the nearby Ruby Mountains for winter quarters. Connor knew that most posts in the west were very remote. However, Fort Ruby was classified by the U. S. Army as, “The Worst Post in the West”. Situated about midway between the 600 mile distance of Salt Lake City and Carson City, he was to protect the Overland Stage Route and the Pony Express from Indian attacks. Fort Ruby was a hostile environment and according to Connor, “Ruby Valley is a bleak, inhospitable place—no forage, nor lumber to build with, and as far as the Indians are concerned, entirely unnecessary to keep troops there.” Connor would only spend one month at Fort Ruby before being summoned to Salt Lake City to establish Fort Douglas.



*Fort Ruby barracks*

The threat of Indian attacks at Fort Ruby were a daily occurrence. Soldiers were assigned to following along with the stages or Pony Express riders under the ever present threat of Indians. The Western Shoshone and Newe Indians constantly disrupted stage and mail service and a year after the establishment of Fort Ruby, the soldier’s efforts proved themselves. On October 1, 1863, a treaty was signed allowing Euro-Americans safe passage and use of the land, particularly

gold mining since gold was a much-needed commodity during the Civil War. In return, the government would give the Indians land to settle on and \$5,000 worth of cattle and goods every year for 20 years. The attacks had stopped but the government took its time holding up their end of the treaty and failed to make payments after the first year. The government also promised a six square mile reservation but again, never delivered. Eventually, Euro-American cattlemen lay claim to much of the Ruby Valley, forcing Shoshone to take jobs as ranch hands or domestic workers. As attacks dwindled, so did the military's interest in the fort. On October 1, 1869, Fort Ruby was ordered to be abandoned. The men and their materials moved to Fort Halleck, 70 miles north of Fort Ruby.



*Spring house*

Many Shoshone fought to get their land back through government allotments and special purchases. As late as 1992, Western Shoshone were disputing the land claims with the federal government and in 2006, most of the Western Shoshone tribal councils had refused to settle for a payment of \$145 million to transfer 25 million acres of their traditional territory to the United States; this settlement was authorized by Congress in 2004. A proud people, they feared that accepting payment would be considered an end to their land claims.

Today, Ruby Valley is home to Ruby Lake National Wildlife Refuge. It is comprised of 37,632 acres of wetlands just east of the Ruby Mountains in Elko County. The refuge is a network of spring fed marshes and shallow ponds dense with green grasses along the pristine water, providing nesting areas and habitat for native birds and mammals. It is also home to

Shantytown, a small community of about fifty homes. As for P. Edward Connor, he continued to serve in the Volunteer Army as a brigadier general against Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians who were attacking travelers along the Bozeman Trail in Montana and Wyoming. Upon establishing Fort Reno, Connor would give an order stating, "You will not receive overtures of peace or submission from Indians, but will attack and kill every male Indian over twelve years of age." This order was rescinded by his commanders but Connor may have disobeyed those commands. During the conflict, his soldiers were constantly harassed and on the defensive, fighting off Indian raids that would leave the men on foot, in rags, and reduced to eating raw horse meat. Connor's efforts in Montana and Wyoming Territories was considered a failure, filled with troops eager to get back home now that the Civil War was over. After the war ended, Connor continued commanding troops on the frontier, eventually retiring in Salt Lake City and establishing one of the city's first newspapers. He also founded the city of Stockton, Utah in honor of his California militia unit. Connor had passed away in 1891 in Salt Lake City, a man whose colorful life would be unknown to most except for the few visitors to the Ruby Valley and the ruins of Fort Ruby.